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The Impact of COVID-19 Related Virtual Learning on Parents Raising Children with Learning Disabilities

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Ty'Sheka Lambert

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

The Impact of COVID-19 Related Virtual Learning on Parents Raising Children with
Learning Disabilities

by

Ty'Sheka Lambert

MS, Walden University, 2019

BS, The University of Alabama, 2016

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Development Psychology

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused major disruptions in education as schools abruptly closed and students transitioned to virtual learning. This shift placed significant strain on parents, especially those raising children with learning disabilities who required consistent accommodations and support. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore parents' perceptions of how COVID-19-related virtual learning affected their children's academic performance, emotional well-being, and daily functioning. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study examined how family, school, and community systems shaped these experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 parents of children with learning disabilities. Using Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step thematic analysis, five themes emerged: (1) Adaptation and Coping Strategies, describing how families created structure and emotional supports; (2) Limited Support and Resources, reflecting gaps in school communication, services, and technology; (3) Mental Health Impact, capturing heightened stress, anxiety, and burnout among parents and children; (4) Parent Advocacy, demonstrating how parents became stronger, more vocal advocates for appropriate services; and (5) Student Emotional Distress and Dysregulation, highlighting increased meltdowns, frustration, and behavioral regression during virtual learning. Findings revealed that schools were often unprepared to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities, leading parents to carry the weight of instruction, emotional support, and service coordination while also facing financial strain. This study has implications for creating trauma-informed practices, supporting social change for students with learning disabilities and their families.

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Dedication

In loving memory of my father, Arthur Thompson, Jr., whose life was tragically taken by a heart attack during the COVID-19 outbreak. Your support and encouragement, even in times of your own struggle, have been the driving force behind my pursuit of knowledge and growth. To my brother, Allen Thompson, thank you for admiring my work ethic. Even in moments when I am "figuring it out," you continue to trust my leadership and guidance. I am extremely proud of you and know you will continue to achieve greatness. Keep shining, I'm always here for you! To my granddad, Allen Lambert, your guidance and belief in me have been the cornerstone of my aspirations. Without your encouragement, the path to my dreams would have remained indefinable. I am mindful of the significance our family name holds for you, and with determination, I have earned the right to attach 'Ph.D.' to it. This triumph is dedicated, not only to my personal journey, but also to the countless lives touched by the devastation of COVID-19. To those who have lost loved ones, your strength in the face of adversity has inspired me beyond words. I extend deep gratitude to all parents who, during the challenges of a global crisis, devoted endless time and energy to parenting and facilitating virtual learning. Your dedication exemplifies the power of resilience and unity in times of hardship. May this dissertation stand as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the boundless capacity of the human heart to endure, to aspire, and to honor those we hold dear.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

COVID-19, also referred to as the coronavirus disease 2019, is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The initial outbreak was identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and rapidly escalated into a global pandemic. This virus, known for its random transmission through coughing, sneezing, talking, and contact with contaminated surfaces, had a significant impact locally and worldwide due to its rapid spread and lack of a definitive cure (Singhal, 2020).

According to Alizadeh et al. (2023), the pandemic's inferences involved various issues including socioeconomic, health, financial, educational, and workplace domains. Healthcare systems confronted strains due to surges in cases, leading to shortages of medical supplies, hospital beds, and healthcare professionals. Simultaneously, COVID-19 impacted schools and education systems across the globe resulting to the transition of virtual learning. Numerous countries, including the United States, enforced widespread school closures, forcing parents, students, administrators, and staff to acclimate to a "new normal." This abrupt transition disrupted traditional in-person learning, compelling educators to swiftly pivot toward remote and online teaching methods. The shift to remote learning was swift, presenting numerous challenges for students, teachers, and parents, particularly in regions with limited access to technology and reliable internet connections.

Foremost, COVID-19 exerted a substantial influence on parents and caregivers, touching on various aspects of their lives. Foremost among these challenges was

childcare, as school closures and remote learning thrust parents into the roles of educators and caregivers. Parents were confronted with the intricate task of juggling work, their children's education, and their own responsibilities within the confines of daily life. The pandemic's economic ramifications, encompassing job losses and reduced income, exacerbated financial stress among many parents, impacting their ability to adequately provide for their children's needs. The pandemic imposed financial strain, emotional and psychological stress due to the management of remote learning, health anxieties, and the overarching uncertainties surrounding COVID-19 (Alizadeh et al., 2023).

However, concerns related to remote and online education assumed a distinct facet for parents of children with special needs. While sharing the trials faced by other parents, those caring for children with special needs and disabilities encountered unique challenges (Averett, 2021). These parents dealt with a sudden disruption of essential services and therapies, as the nation tried to navigate multiple uncertainties simultaneously. Remote learning, less conducive to accommodating the specific needs of these children, further intensified the situation (Averett, 2021). The absence of personalized support, sensory stimulation, and the structured environment provided by in-person schooling posed significant hurdles for these students. The impacts of the pandemic on children with special needs displayed a diverse spectrum, influenced by factors such as the nature and severity of the disability, available resources, and the family's support network.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a deep impact on nearly every aspect of society, with education being among the most significantly affected (Adhikari et al., 2020). The sudden and widespread shift to virtual learning has raised numerous challenges for students, parents, and educators. Within this context, parents raising children with learning disabilities have faced a unique set of obstacles and disruptions that have significantly influenced their children's educational experiences (Isnawan et al., 2023). The pandemic demanded a rapid adaptation to virtual learning platforms as a means to ensure the continuity of education (Adhikari et al., 2020). However, for parents of children with learning disabilities, this transition introduced a set of distinct challenges. The traditional in-person support and accommodations that these students often rely on were suddenly disrupted, requiring parents to navigate unfamiliar spaces and make significant adjustments to support their children's educational needs (Isnawan et al., 2023).

In this qualitative study, I aimed to explore the experiences of these parents in-depth, capturing the intricate narratives and voices of those who have faced with the complexities, successes, and adaptations required during the pandemic. By diving into the lived experiences of these families, I sought to contribute to the broader discussion surrounding the evolving landscape of education during the pandemic. The findings of this study may offer valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by parents of children with learning disabilities and the innovative strategies they have developed to address these challenges. By gaining a deeper understanding of their perspectives, this

research has the potential to inform the development of more effective support systems and policies, not only during times of crisis but also in the context of the ever-evolving educational landscape. Ultimately, I aimed to enhance the educational outcomes for all children, with a particular focus on those with learning disabilities, within the context of the ongoing global health crisis.

Problem Statement

The outbreak of a pandemic has compelled countless Americans across the United States to navigate its impact. As stated by Alizadeh et al. (2023), the coronavirus emerged as a pneumonia case in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The virus swiftly spread and attained global pandemic status on March 11, 2020 (Alizadeh et al., 2023). This global emergency by the World Health Organization in March 2020 raised substantial concerns due to the escalating levels of transmission and severity (Alizadeh et al., 2023). According to Amara et al. (2021), President Donald Trump declared a national emergency in the United States in response to the COVID-19 crisis, unlocking billions of dollars in federal funding to combat the spread of the virus.

Since March 2020, the lives of numerous Americans have been permanently altered by the arrival of COVID-19. In response to the national emergency, a multitude of schools promptly closed as a precautionary measure, given the uncertainty surrounding effective safeguards against the virus's rapid spread (Adhikari et al., 2020). Collaborative efforts were initiated among school systems and districts to devise solutions that catered to students' diverse learning styles. Drawing from my own experience working in a

charter school environment during this period, it was evident that virtual learning posed considerable challenges, particularly for students with disabilities.

As the 2020-2021 academic year began, a significant portion of K-12 students began their studies from the confines of their homes, engaging with educational content through computer screens (Amara et al., 2021). Students with learning disabilities navigated the changes formed by the pandemic with the support of their parents. These parents, many of whom lacked professional teaching experience, undertook the role of educators alongside their pre-existing parental responsibilities. This transition, compounded by the complexities of virtual learning, stimulated challenges in comprehending various concepts. The strain on parents of children with disabilities was intense, as they grappled with the demands of self-education and guiding their children in adapting to the virtual country. Moreover, parents struggled to maintain their own employment and tending to household needs, thus reshaping the parent-child dynamic. In addition to witnessing their children's frustrations, anxieties, and setbacks in the context of virtual learning, parents of children with learning disabilities had to navigate these challenges firsthand. This educational shift highlighted the complexities inherent in teaching students with diverse needs within a virtual environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the perceptions provided by parents of children with learning disabilities regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, regarding school closures and the shift to virtual learning. Specifically, I explained how these parents perceived the effects on their

children's academic performance, the parents' livelihoods, and family maintenance, alongside the social and mental well-being of their children. Through qualitative research, I provide comprehensive insights into the challenges and experiences encountered by these families during the pandemic. My results may provide future and supportive strategies specifically dedicated to the needs of children with learning disabilities and their families.

Research Question

RQ1: How do parents of children with learning disabilities perceive and describe the multifaceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including school closures and virtual learning, on their children's academic performance, the parents' ability to earn a living and maintain their families, as well as the social and mental health of the children?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study was Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977). Bronfenbrenner (1979) provided a comprehensive and valuable conceptual framework for analyzing the various layers of the environment that influence a child's formative experiences. This theory provides the opportunity to take a holistic view of a child, considering numerous factors, including but not limited to their community, school, family, emotional well-being, and other influential components. This body of literature serves as an essential guide for comprehending the complexities of the ecological systems theory, highlighting how a child's environment contributes to their unique learning style and overall upbringing during the pandemic. In this study, the ecological systems theory served as a framework, allowing for the exploration of how the

outbreak of the pandemic has impacted children with learning disabilities. Additionally, it facilitated an examination of the intricate dynamics within families concerning the maintenance of household stability in financial, social, and emotional aspects.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative research is a method that seeks answers to questions and involves the collection of evidence (Urcia, 2021). Qualitative researchers use a wide range of in-depth research methods such as interviews to collect data. To address my research questions, the specific research design I used is phenomenology. The phenomenological approach (PA) is used to deeply understand a phenomenon's fundamental dimensions based on the inner essence and structure of participants' lived experiences (van Manen, 2016). This approach allowed me the opportunity to conduct one-on-one interviews with 12 parents raising children with learning disabilities who have been impacted due to COVID-19 and the necessity of education via the virtual learning platform. According to Crouch and McKenzie (2006), using fewer than 20 participants during a qualitative research study will result in better data. This is because a small group is easier for the researcher to build strong and close relationships with the participants. This often leads to natural conversations and better data. The PA was an appropriate design for this study because it consists of what the parents have experienced and how they experienced making it individualized to their lived experience. The research design included the recruitment of parents who were willing to participate. Once parents consented to participate, they were provided with a copy of the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. All participants were made aware of their right to end their participation in the research

study. In addition, parents had to complete a consent form prior to participating in the study. The consent form was evaluated by the researcher (me) to ensure parents met the criteria of the study for eligibility purposes. The consent form also included two sample questions, allowing participants to preview the structure and flow of the conversation in advance. Interviews were conducted via Zoom allowing parents the opportunity to select the time and date that worked best for their schedule. Interviews did not exceed a 1-hour timeframe. The goal was to ask probing questions to gain a vivid understanding of the parent's experience in order to answer the research questions. Parents must have had children in Grades K-12 during the time of the pandemic in order to participate in the experience.

Definitions

Some terms within this study are used interchangeably and noted within the definitions.

Coronavirus (COVID-19): COVID-19, also referred to as the coronavirus disease 2019, is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

Disabilities: Educating children with disabilities during COVID-19 refers to the provision of inclusive and accessible education for students with diverse learning needs and disabilities in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Parenting: Parenting in the context of COVID-19 refers to the role and responsibilities of parents in supporting and nurturing their children during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This meaning of parenting includes the range of activities and

challenges that parents have faced due to the pandemic's impact on various aspects of family life including education.

School closure: The temporary shutdown or cessation of in-person classes and educational activities in schools and educational institutions to mitigate the spread of the virus.

Virtual learning: Virtual learning, in the context of COVID-19 scholarly articles, refers to an educational approach that relies on digital technologies and the internet to deliver instruction to students remotely.

Assumptions

I conducted this study on the premise that each participant provided accurate and truthful responses to all the questionnaires, ensuring the validity of the conclusions drawn. Additionally, I assumed that all participants comprehended the interview questions accurately, allowing meaningful insights to be collected from their responses. Lastly, I assumed that all participants were transparent in regard to their lived experiences during this time.

Limitations

Gathering primary data may encounter challenges such as parents' willingness to openly share sensitive details and potential hurdles in recruiting interview participants. Another obstacle could arise from parents' desire to safeguard their child's disability-related information. It is important to emphasize that confidential or medical data about the child's disability and their identity is unnecessary. Notably, I focused on parents as

participants, excluding the children themselves. It was explicitly clarified in the criteria that the study exclusively involves parents of children with disabilities.

Significance of the Study

This is a significant study because it fills a gap in understanding. I focused specifically on improving and gaining a better understanding of how parents raising children with learning disabilities have been impacted due to COVID-19 and the necessity of education via the virtual learning platform. The findings of this study might assist educators and education policymakers in helping parents and students develop strategies and techniques to overcome situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Education has long been a force for social change by addressing the concerns of communities and students with disabilities. Since there is a broad range of students who have learning disabilities, supporting their academic needs allows an increase in parental support and support of children with disabilities during unexpected crises such as COVID-19.

Summary

The objective of this qualitative study was to develop a greater understanding of the challenges parents faced during the pandemic as it relates to educating children with disabilities. This study was necessary because there are limited data and information regarding the topic. COVID-19 was a global pandemic, and it is safe to say there was not a plan in place to rectify the issue. I used Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory to explore how families' decisions are formed regarding their child's transition process. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory served as a valuable and

comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families, particularly those raising children with learning disabilities. This theoretical perspective, developed by Bronfenbrenner in 1977, suggests that individuals are influenced by a set of nested environmental systems, each interacting with and impacting others. The ecological systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

This study served as a space allowing parents an opportunity to voice their concerns regarding their shift in lifestyle for the betterment of their child(ren) education. Parent perspective is very imperative in this study because it addresses the gaps within the literature. Parents were given a space to discuss what worked and what did not work during the outbreak of COVID-19. In addition, parents were allotted the opportunity discuss the hardships COVID-19 caused their child(ren) education as well as their household as they were trying to accommodate their children's needs. In Chapter 2, I review literature that addressed the challenges that made parenting children with disabilities difficult during this time. In Chapter 2, I explore literature that emphasizes the interconnectedness of various environmental systems and acknowledges the dynamic nature of these interactions over time of the intricate dynamics at play in the lives of these families during the pandemic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the landscape of education worldwide, compelling a swift transition to virtual learning model. The swift happened so fast, leaving many school districts unprepared for from in-person to virtual learning. As educational institutions struggled with the challenges posed by the pandemic, parents raising children with learning disabilities found themselves navigating unfamiliar challenges. In this chapter, I discuss the existing body of literature surrounding the impact of COVID-19-related virtual learning and how it impacted parents, especially those that had children with learning disabilities. I wanted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complicated challenges faced by parents, exploring the intersections of virtual learning, parenting, and the unique needs of children with learning disabilities. This literature review represents key concepts important to this study, including COVID-19 itself, the dynamics of virtual learning, the evolving role of parenting during the pandemic, educating children with disabilities, and the implications of school closures. By combining relevant scholarly articles, research studies, and theoretical frameworks, I aimed to offer insights into the experiences of parents and their children with learning disabilities in the context of virtual education. The conceptual framework guiding this review is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which provides a holistic lens which examines the factors influencing the educational experiences of children with learning disabilities during the pandemic. By grounding the exploration in this conceptual framework, I aim to highlight the layers of influence, ranging from the immediate

microsystem of the family to the broader macrosystem shaped by the global impact of COVID-19.

As I explore the literature, it became apparent that the effects of virtual learning extend beyond the educational systems and procedures. It impacts the daily lives, mental well-being, and social dynamics of families. I examine the challenges posed by virtual learning, the disparities in access and resources, and the innovative strategies employed by parents to support their children's education. Additionally, I address some of the evolving role of parents as educators, advocates, and caregivers in the face of unique disruptions. Through a particular exploration of the literature, this chapter sets the stage for understanding the experiences of parents raising children with learning disabilities in the era of COVID-19-related virtual learning. Considering the recovery of COVID-19 is new, there is still research that is needed to address the issues that were faced during this time. Parents, educators, and many others are still working diligently to develop strategies to address the gaps that impacted children and families during the outbreak of the pandemic.

Literature Search Strategy

This literature review search was based on the following question: How do parents of children with learning disabilities perceive and describe the multifaceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including school closures and virtual learning, on their children's academic performance, the parents' ability to earn a living and maintain their families, as well as the social and mental health of the children?

The keywords searched were *COVID-19*, *COVID-19 virtual learning*, *parenting during a pandemic*, *virtual learning with learning disabilities*, *parenting and virtual learning*, *at home learning*, *online learning*, *parenting during the global outbreak*, *parent support during a pandemic*, *learning during the pandemic*, *parenting*, *children/students with disabilities during COVID-19*, *Trump & virtual learning*, and *emergency remote teaching*. I used Walden University databases to conduct a literature search. When utilizing Walden's database, I used scholarly articles and studies, peer-reviewed journals, and other accredited studies. I also used SAGE Publications, Google Scholar, Education Resource Information System (ERIC), and PsycINFO to help with the findings of articles relate to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted parents of children with disabilities during virtual learning.

Conceptual Framework

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted parents of children with disabilities during virtual learning, introducing a host of challenges that reshaped their roles and responsibilities (Golden et al., 2023). The abrupt shift to online education disrupted established routines and support services, compelling parents to take on expanded caregiving roles. Technological barriers added complications, as some families faced difficulties accessing devices or navigating virtual learning platforms (Golden et al., 2023). The absence of in-person specialized support, such as individualized education plans (IEPs), amplified concerns about the adequacy of assistance for children with disabilities. Social isolation emerged as a prevalent issue, impacting children's social interactions and raising worries about their emotional well-being. Financial strain,

coupled with the emotional toll of managing these challenges, contributed to heightened stress levels among parents. According to Francis et al. (2022), navigating advocacy and communication in a virtual context posed additional hurdles, requiring parents to adapt and advocate effectively for their child's needs within the transformed educational landscape. The collective impact emphasized the resilience of parents, who navigated these complexities to support their children's learning and well-being during these unprecedented times.

I focused on bridging the literature gap concerning parents' perspectives as it relates to the effects of COVID-19 related virtual learning on parents raising children with learning disabilities. These perspectives were based on the lived experiences and hardships that parents endured during this time while still trying to maintain a healthy educational environment for children with learning gaps and disadvantages to learn. Examining the impact COVID-19 had on parents and children really impacted the dynamics of the family, including everything around the child. Looking at the development of the child and their ecological background played a role in understanding family decision makings. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory was used to provide a theoretical framework for explaining this phenomenon in the context of the challenges posed by virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to El Zaatari & Maalouf (2022), the ecological systems theory enables a holistic examination of a child, considering numerous factors such as their community, school, family, emotional well-being, and other influential components. This approach allows for an understanding of the interconnected systems that contribute to a child's

unique learning style and overall upbringing. The existing body of literature on the ecological systems theory serves as an essential guide, offering insights into the complexities of this theoretical framework. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory serves as the overarching framework, providing a structured approach to explore the impact of the pandemic on children with learning disabilities. It facilitates an examination of how the outbreak has disrupted the various layers of a child's environment, influencing their learning experiences. Furthermore, the theory allows for an in-depth analysis of the intricate dynamics within families, shedding light on how they navigate challenges in maintaining household stability across financial, social, and emotional dimensions. By adopting the ecological systems theory, I aimed to undo the multifaceted effects of the pandemic on children with learning disabilities and clarify the complex interactions within their familial and environmental contexts.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Academic Performance and Parental Coping Strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic required a rapid shift to virtual learning, placing an exceptional amount of stress on parents, particularly those with children who have learning disabilities. According to Reeves (2021), virtual learning presented significant challenges for parents, including managing income, technology, mental health, and parental insecurities, all of which were intensified in families with multiple children. Parents were forced into dual roles of educators and school administrators, often without the necessary support or resources. Reeves (2021) highlighted that keeping children on task, managing excessive screen time, and ensuring social interaction were significant

concerns. The struggle to adhere to IEPs or 504 plans was particularly obvious as parents often lacked the understanding or time to implement necessary accommodations for their child's virtual learning. Positive coping strategies included establishing structured routines and dedicated learning spaces, which were crucial for enhancing children's academic performance and emotional resilience (Reeves, 2021). However, negative outcomes such as parental stress, technological challenges, and limited resources also emerged, leading to decreased engagement and heightened anxiety among students.

Considering the stress levels of parents, but most importantly children, several studies have highlighted the impact of virtual learning on students' academic performance. According to Tomasik et al. (2020), there was a noticeable decline in academic achievement during the initial phase of virtual learning compared to pre-pandemic levels. The researchers credited this decline to various factors, including limited access to resources, reduced direct interaction with teachers, and the challenges of adapting to a new learning environment (Tomasik et al., 2020). According to Engzell et al. (2021), the impact of virtual learning varied across different demographic groups. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were disproportionately affected, showing greater declines in academic performance compared to their more well-off peers. This disparity emphasizes the importance of addressing the digital divide and ensuring equitable access to educational resources.

Parents played a critical role in supporting their children's education during virtual learning. Coping strategies adopted by parents to manage the stress and demands of this period have been extensively studied. Spinelli et al. (2020) identified several coping

mechanisms, including establishing routines, creating a conducive learning environment, and seeking support from other family members or external resources. Further research by Ogurlu et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of parental involvement in their children's virtual learning. They found that parents who actively engaged in their children's education by helping with assignments and maintaining communication with teachers reported better academic outcomes for their children. However, this involvement often came at the cost of increased stress and time demands on parents, particularly those balancing work and household responsibilities (Ogurlu et al., 2020). In general, the level of stress associated with virtual learning and the pandemic affect both the parents and children. Parents demonstrated and expressed high levels of stress due to the increased demands of monitoring and supporting their children's learning while managing their own work-from-home responsibilities (Lee et al., 2021).

Social and Emotional Impact on Parents and Children

The social and emotional toll on parents of children with learning disabilities during the pandemic was noticeable. Parents' stress levels have increased as a result of the epidemic, especially because of their increased caregiving responsibilities and uncertain financial future (Hochman et al., 2022). Parents reported increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression during the pandemic compared to prepandemic levels, according to Patrick et al. (2020). Job loss, unstable finances, and the difficulty of juggling work and children are some of the factors causing these elevated stress levels (Prime et al., 2020). Additionally, mothers have been disproportionately affected by the epidemic because they have assumed a larger share of household and caregiving

responsibilities (Collins et al., 2020). Mothers are experiencing more mental health problems as a result of this gender gap, like as burnout and a decline in wellbeing.

The pandemic has also caused serious social and emotional difficulties for children. Their social connections and academic habits have been disturbed by remote learning, which has made them feel anxious and alone. According to Loades et al. (2020), children and adolescents who experience social isolation and loneliness are more likely to experience anxiety and depression. During the pandemic, children were forced to be social isolated and secluded due to social distancing. In addition, children's social development has suffered from a decrease in in-person interactions with classmates and the elimination of extracurricular activities. Children's emotional discomfort and behavioral issues were intensified by unstructured school environments and peer relationships (Singh et al., 2020).

Parent-child interactions have changed as a result of the pandemic, both positively and negatively. Positively, spending more time at home has enhanced family support and bonding. But families are also experiencing more conflict and tension as a result of the increasing obligations and stress (Spinelli et al., 2020). The mental health of parents directly affected the well-being of their children during this time. Gassman-Pines et al. (2020) stated children who have high stress levels and mental health difficulties are more likely to have emotional and behavioral challenges. With this understanding, it is extremely critical to aid parents' mental health in order to lessen the detrimental effects on their kids.

Parents' Ability to Earn a Living and Maintain Their Families

The pandemic created a major shift in the workforce, especially for parents during the time. Numerous studies demonstrate how the pandemic has seriously disrupted people's finances, especially for parents. In fact, some families are still suffering from financial hardship due to the fact they were impacted tremendously. According to Gould and Kassa (2021), the unbalanced effect on low-income families and single parents, who experienced increased job insecurity because of job losses and shortened workweeks. According to statistical data from the study, parents, especially mothers were more likely than non-parents to lose their jobs. For working parents, the change to remote employment brought both benefits and drawbacks. While working remotely helped some parents keep their jobs, it also made childcare and homeschooling more demanding, which increased stress and decreased productivity (Del Boca et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, parents sacrifice financially, mentally, socially, and many other ways. Families relied on their support systems during this time. A range of coping mechanisms and support networks surfaced to assist parents in navigating the obstacles and roadblocks of the pandemic. In fact, research by Prime et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of government aid programs, social support networks, and community resources in reducing the negative impacts of the pandemic on families. These networks of support played a critical role in assisting parents in stress management and preserving family harmony. The pandemic has brought to light important weaknesses in parents' capacity to support their family and make a living. According to Patrick et al. (2020), gender inequality, job insecurity, and economic turmoil have all had a significant

negative influence on family well-being. To effectively address these concerns and ensure that parents are better equipped to handle future crises, comprehensive policies and support networks that advance gender equality and economic stability are needed (Patrick et al., 2020).

Challenges Faced by Parents of Children with Disabilities

Parents of children with disabilities encountered unique challenges during the pandemic, particularly in maintaining routines and accessing essential services. Kilinc et al. (2023) noted that mothers of children with disabilities faced significant challenges in their teaching roles, impacting both mother-child relationships and the mental well-being of both parties. The limited access to educational and therapy services during the pandemic intensified these challenges, placing additional mental, physical, and financial burdens on parents (Rakap et al., 2023). Rakap et al. (2023) noted parents often resorted to coping strategies that revolved around adapting to the new normal, such as prioritizing cleaning to prevent virus spread. The shift in household priorities and the lack of traditional rehabilitation and therapy centers added to the difficulties, with parents struggling to ensure their children's compliance with health precautions and maintain their cognitive development (Başaran & Aksoy, 2020).

Educational Support Systems: Evaluating the Role of Schools and Communities

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges to educational systems worldwide, particularly impacting children with disabilities. Schools have traditionally served as essential hubs for educational support, and their role became even more crucial during the pandemic. The shift to remote learning posed unique challenges for children

with disabilities, who often require specialized services and individualized attention. According to a report by the National Center for Special Education Research, the closure of schools disrupted the delivery of services outlined in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), raising concerns about meeting the diverse needs of students with disabilities. To address these challenges, schools implemented various strategies to support families. As previously mentioned, many schools transitioned to virtual classrooms, leveraging online platforms to continue educational services. However, the success of these efforts varied, and a study published in the *Journal of Special Education Technology* highlighted the need for additional support and accommodations to ensure the inclusion of students with disabilities in remote learning environments. The adaptability of schools in implementing inclusive practices during virtual learning played a critical role in mitigating the impact on children with disabilities.

Community support has also played a vital role in the educational well-being of children with disabilities during the pandemic. Community organizations, parent groups, and local initiatives have stepped up to fill the gaps left by school closures. According to a publication by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, collaborative efforts between schools and communities have been instrumental in providing resources, support networks, and guidance to parents of children with disabilities navigating remote learning challenges. However, the effectiveness of these support systems has been influenced by pre-existing disparities. A report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that children with disabilities, particularly those from low-income families, faced greater challenges in accessing remote learning

opportunities. The digital divide, intensified by socioeconomic factors, highlighted the need for targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to educational support. Policy implications have also emerged in this context. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education, irrespective of the circumstances. The U.S. Department of Education provided guidance on how schools should adapt services for students with disabilities during the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of flexibility and collaboration with parents.

Summary and Conclusions

The impact of COVID-19-related virtual learning on parents raising children with learning disabilities highlights significant gaps and limitations in existing research. While studies acknowledge the stress experienced by parents, particularly emotionally and financially, there remains insufficient exploration into the specific challenges faced by parents of children with disabilities during the pandemic (Kilinc & Fitzgerald, 2020). Research indicates a need for deeper understanding of the experiences of these parents, including their ability to reconceptualize their child's capabilities and the transparency surrounding educators' experiences (Kilinc & Fitzgerald, 2020). This study aims to grasp a deeper perspective and understanding of what supports parents and children needed. Furthermore, this study seeks to provide parents with a platform to voice their concerns and advocate for their children's needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to explore ways in which the education system can enhance its support for families facing similar challenges in the future. While parents demonstrated a strong desire to support

their children during this time, many lacked the necessary skills and resources to do so effectively. This study aims to shed light on these shortcomings and propose strategies for improvement in future crisis situations.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore how parents of children with learning disabilities perceived the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as school closures and virtual learning, on their children's academic performance, the parents' economic stability, and the social and mental well-being of the children.

Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the perceptions provided by parents of children with learning disabilities regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, regarding school closures and the shift to virtual learning. Throughout the research study, I interviewed parents to grasp a better understanding of what impacts the pandemic had on their child's academic progression, the mental instability the pandemic had not only the child but the parent as well. In addition to the financial hardships the pandemic had on parents during this difficult time. Causal and semi-structured interview sessions were conducted to address the following research question: How do parents of children with learning disabilities perceive and describe the multifaceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including school closures and virtual learning, on their children's academic performance, the parents' ability to earn a living and maintain their families, as well as the social and mental health of the children? A minimum of 10 participants was required to obtain adequate data and this study contained a total of 12 participants. These participants consisted of parents of children with disabilities enrolled in Grades K-12, all of whom experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to school closures and the transition to virtual

learning. As a person in education during the pandemic, this topic was important because I experienced first-hand parents that struggled significantly from the impact and effects of the pandemic.

Role of the Researcher

My professional background showcases my commitment to education and community. I have had the privilege of serving at two distinct charter schools within the greater Atlanta area, with one tenure concurring with the peak of the pandemic and the other immediately following its initial impact. During my role as an assistant executive director and operations manager for these charter schools, I gained experience in navigating the challenges faced by children and families during this period, particularly those with children coping with learning disabilities. The transition from in-person to virtual learning was not just a logistical obstacle; it was a overwhelming disruption to the routines and support systems that families depended on. I vividly recall the frustrations voiced by parents, echoing the same feelings of their children as they maneuvered through this “new norm.” In my current role as a community engagement organizer for an education advocacy nonprofit, I am continually reminded of the frustrations, emotions, and stories shared by parents facing a lack of disability services, efficient financial assistance and the impact of learning loss. It is these connections and stories that fueled my dedication to education advocacy and my decision to dig deeper into the topic for my qualitative research study. As an education advocate, I had the privilege of engaging in genuine conversations with these parents, gaining invaluable insights into the challenges they faced and the resilience they demonstrated during moments of hardship.

Methodology

My goal with this qualitative study was to better understand how parents of children with cognitive difficulties perceived the COVID-19 pandemic's effects, including the closing of schools and the transition to online instruction. I conducted focused-driven interviews to gain the perspectives and insights of parents. This method of research allowed me the opportunity to truly dive into the experiences of parents that faced difficulties during this time. Parents were able to be vulnerable and share their insights regarding the ways the pandemic impacted the learning disability as well as the structure of the household. Considering the pandemic occurred in 2020, the topic is still relatively new and limited regarding research. This qualitative research study was designed to offer a solution and strategy to help parents that were impacted by COVID-19 pandemic's effects, including the closing of schools and the transition to online instruction.

This study was designed to contribute to filling the gap in understanding and offer potential solutions and strategies to support parents impacted by the disruptions of the pandemic. The insufficiency of available research motivated the conceptualization of this study, with the hope of providing guidance so that parents or children do not have to suffer this severely again. During the literature review process, I discovered existing research concerning school closure and the transition to online instruction during the pandemic, especially focusing specifically on children with learning disabilities, was limited and lacking. Understanding limitations is fundamental for contextualizing study findings, assessing the validity of scientific effort, and giving published research

conclusions a level of credibility (Ioannidis, 2007). By addressing these limitations, this qualitative study provided understandings to support parents and children facing similar challenges in the event of any future crises such as COVID-19.

Participant Selection

Given the widespread impact of the pandemic across the entire United States, I extended invitations for participation to individuals from all regions of the country. I was intentional about reaching out to various platforms, including social media groups and community platforms to ensure inclusivity and diversity in my participant pool. Guided by the directives of my dissertation committee, a minimum of 10 participants was required to attain adequate data. These participants consisted of parents of children with disabilities enrolled in Grades K-12, all of whom experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to school closures and the transition to virtual learning which impacted their children's academic performance, the parents' economic stability, and the social and mental well-being of the children. To ensure an all-inclusive perspective, participants were required to fulfill the role of a mother, father, or legal guardian/caregiver.

Instrumentation

For this qualitative research study, I used a voice recorder to record the conversation I have with each participant. I wanted to ensure I use a tool that would accurately capture the conversation between myself and the interviewee. Conducting individual interviews, participants were offered the flexibility of meeting virtually or in-person. The setting for these interviews was casual, cultivating a comfortable atmosphere

for all participants throughout the duration of the conversation. Guided by the interview questions in the Appendix, the discussion was centered around the research topic.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After obtaining approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board, the recruitment for participants began. As previously mentioned, I contacted various social media platforms and community platforms, to ensure inclusivity and diversity in my participant pool. I am a part of many parent Facebook parent groups, and I have well-rounded following on LinkedIn. I created a flyer with that included the details of the study and what qualified parent and/or legal caregiver the eligibility to participant. To incentivize participation, all individuals that signed up and qualified were offered a \$20 Visa gift card. Interested individuals were directed to complete a Google Form interest form and consent form, providing basic information such as their name, contact details, location, and details about their child's age, grade, and learning disability. Simple yes or no questions were included to determine eligibility. Upon evaluating the responses and confirming eligibility, participants received an email from me outlining the next steps and providing details on how to schedule an interview appointment. Depending on their preference and location, participants were given the option to choose between an in-person or virtual interview.

Each participant was allocated a 1-hour time slot for the interview, allowing ample time for them to share their experiences comfortably. The interviews were conducted ensuring privacy and confidentiality. Virtual interviews were conducted via Zoom in a private location, ensuring that only I had access to the conversation recording.

For in-person interviews, a private room at a local library was reserved to maintain confidentiality. Prior to beginning the interview, I reiterated the eligibility criteria and reviewed the privacy and consent guidelines with the participant. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were recorded to enable accurate data analysis and interpretation. The recordings also allowed me to revisit the conversation as needed during the data analysis phase. Overall, the recruitment and interview process prioritized participant comfort, privacy, and ethical considerations in line with the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct.

Data Analysis Plan

To transcribe the data, I used the dictate feature in Microsoft Word. This feature assisted with the transcription of the conversation. To analyze the data, I used the NVivo software. This software assisted me with organizing the data and identifying the commonalities and themes of the data. Using NVivo enhanced the data visualization and the synthesis of the qualitative study. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2013) systemic six-step thematic analysis, I used a rigorous and intentional process to identify patterns within the interview data and represented the lived experiences of parents and their children to capture patterns in the interviews and capture the experiences of parents and their children. The data analysis followed the six sequential stages outlined by Braun and Clarke: (a) familiarization with data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing the report.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is determined by four highly scoring factors – credibility, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Amankwaa, 2016).

Trustworthiness is essential for ensuring the integrity and validity of qualitative research studies like this one, particularly when exploring a sensitive topic such as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children with learning disabilities and their families.

Trustworthiness is necessary regarding qualitative research because it tells the story of the research and supports the accuracy of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure the trustworthiness of my research, I recorded and transcribed the data with the consent of all participants to certify trust and truth throughout the research.

Credibility

According to Elo et al. (2014), establishing credibility through trust-building ensures that participants provide authentic responses, which strengthens the overall reliability and validity of qualitative findings. I noticed once parents trusted me as the researcher, they were more willing to openly share their experiences and opinions about how the pandemic has impacted their kids' social and psychological growth, performance in school, and their ability to support their families. To valid the feelings of the participants, I made sure I took thorough notes of the conversation and followed up regarding anything I was uncertain about or needed clarification on. Replaying the audio also validated the creditability in the event I needed to relisten to the conversation.

Transferability

Transferability is identified as the “quality criterion” of the qualitative research (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). Trustworthiness enhances the transferability of the research findings. According to Stalmeijer et al. (2024) when participants trust the researcher and feel confident that their experiences will be accurately represented, they are more likely to participate in the study. To ensure transferability, I was extremely detailed and precise regarding the step-by-step processes of the study, study descriptions, participant guidelines. I wanted to make sure I was detailed and precise so that other researchers could follow along and build upon the study if necessary.

Dependability

The ‘thick’ or ‘rich’ description from the transferability leads to the dependability (Janis, 2022). According to Janis (2022), the dependability is known as the consistency of the research. Considering I interviewed 12 participants and asked them all the same questions and was sure to validate the participants' responses, this demonstrated dependable data. Also assuring all participants were able to conduct the interviews in a comfortable setting brought comfortable responses, making the interview authentic. Assuring that my findings showed that consistency can still be achieved, increases the chances of the research study could be repeated by a separate researcher and reveal the same findings (Janis, 2022).

Confirmability

In qualitative research, the confirmability principle refers to how credible the study's conclusions and findings are judged to be (Nassaji, 2020). To ensure the research

presented was deemed as confirmable, I included 12 participants in my study. I was sure to point out any trends and commonalities amongst the participants. In addition, I included the transcripts I used to transcribe the data. I used the dictate feature in Microsoft Word. This feature assisted with the transcription of the conversation. I also used the NVivo software which is another reputable tool that I used to help identify themes and bring the data together. The transparency of the interview and the open-ended of truth and understanding led to guarantee accuracy of what was analyzed and reported in the data.

Ethical Procedures

Maintaining ethical standards and procedures are crucial when conducting research. Ethical standards safeguard the protection of participants' rights, well-being, and self-respect throughout the research process. As the researchers, obtained informed consent from each participant, confirming they understood the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and any potential risks involved. As the researcher, I upheld the confidentiality of participants' personal information and data. Regarding certifying trust, I respected the privacy of each participant which built a great amount of trust and increased honesty and open-minded participation in the research.

After obtaining approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board (Approval Number 12-06-24-0981519), participants that were deemed as eligible moved forward with the interview process. Qualifying participants received a detailed email from me outlining the details of the study, and the protection and privacy regulations. Every step of the interview process was consent based; therefore, transparency was enforced to

assure the security of the participant throughout the study. The recruitment and interview process prioritized participant comfort, privacy, and ethical considerations in line with the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. As an addition to participants receiving a copy of their rights and the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, as an additional safety measure, I reiterated the eligibility criteria and reviewed the privacy and consent guidelines with the participant.

Summary

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore how parents of children with learning disabilities perceived the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as school closures and virtual learning, on their children's academic performance, the parents' economic stability, and the social and mental well-being of the children. Twelve participants were selected and allowed the opportunity to provide their honest experiences as it related to their child(ren) education and the impact of the pandemic. Chapter 3 explained the research methods and processes that were used to collect the data. An important appreciation of Chapter 3 was the thorough understanding of the rights and protection of all participants. It is crucial for both the research and the participant to understand this component of the research before proceeding with the research, and Chapter 3 made it clear how this was done. When considering the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), I wanted to make sure parents were aware of their rights and their data would be well protected. Chapter 4 contains the results of

this qualitative study, and the findings are explained through a deep dive of the data analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative study was conducted to gain a better understanding of the perceptions provided by parents of children with learning disabilities regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, regarding school closures, and the shift to virtual learning. Specifically, I sought to explain how these parents perceived the effects on their children's academic performance, the parents' livelihoods, and family maintenance, alongside the social and mental well-being of their children. I used Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory to demonstrate how the entire well-being of the child was impacted during the pandemic. In addition, I used Braun and Clarke's 6-step framework. Braun and Clarke's (2013) six step data analysis process was used to identify themes and patterns in the data. These six steps are (a) familiarization with data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing the report.

Twelve participants willingly participated in the interview. They were asked questions that were relevant to their experiences and the needs of their child with special needs during the pandemic. The participants were parents or legal guardians of a child with a diagnosed learning disability who was enrolled in Grades K-12 during the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants were recruited via social media. All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. Participants had the option to choose the date, and the time was most comfortable and convenient for them. All participants interviewed with their cameras on making the experience extremely inviting and genuine. All Zoom conversations were recorded for quality assurance, and participants were made aware of

the meetings were being recorded to ensure all conversations were accurate for data reporting purposes only. In Chapter 4, I discuss a description of the setting, demographics, data analysis, data collection, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and summary conclusion.

Setting

I was intentional about finding parents who had a story to tell and deserved a space to do so. Therefore, I identified the parent or legal guardian of a child with a diagnosed learning disability who was enrolled in Grades K-12 during the COVID-19 pandemic. These were parents who were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of school closures and the transition to virtual learning, which affected the child's academic performance, the parent's economic stability, and the child's social and mental well-being. I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Each participant was asked the same number of questions and was given the opportunity to expand upon their responses when needed. All conversations were recorded, and each interview was saved as Parent 1, Parent 2, and so forth in the order in which parents interviewed. All identities were protected, and parents were sent a copy of the transcript of their interview to confirm if changes were needed. If changes or edits were provided by the parent, I immediately implemented the edits.

Data Collection

The participants of this study were the parents or legal guardians of a child with a diagnosed learning disability who was enrolled in Grades K-12 during the COVID-19 pandemic. These were parents of a child who either had either a 504 plan or an IEP,

meaning these students required specific accommodations based on their needs written in the plan. A flyer was shared all over social media to recruit parents. This flyer was shared on Facebook, Instagram, and posted in various places in the community, such as library community corners. I posted the flyer every other day on social media to recruit and ensure I was reaching the right target audience and to ensure the flyer was exposed to as many participants as possible. The Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) permitted me with approval to proceed with collecting data; therefore, the data collection process started. Once an interested parent reviewed the flyer, there was a QR code with a direct link to the consent and demographic form. The consent form vividly explained the purpose of the study, the qualifications, the procedures, and various support organizations that were aligned with the study. Once the participants reviewed and read the consent form, participants were to respond “I consent” to continue the process. After selecting “I consent,” participants were directed to a demographic form which asked specific questions about the 2020-2021 academic school year as it related to their child with the learning disability. The child’s name was not collected during the process. Once the consent form and demographic form were reviewed by me, each participant received an email which explained how to schedule an interview time that worked best for their schedule via Zoom. Once participants scheduled an interview time, they received a confirmation email as well as a calendar invite for the scheduled interview. Before each interview began, I informed participants of the purpose of the study. I also reminded participants of the confidentiality of the study and reassured all participants of their rights as participants. Participants had the right to discontinue the study at any point if they felt

uncomfortable or no longer wanted to participate. Each participant was asked nine open-ended questions (see Appendix). The interviews were semi-structured and took place in a private setting. Each interviewee was allotted up to 1-hour time block; however, most interviews only took approximately 30-35 minutes to complete in total. As mentioned, before each interview began, I was sure to make all participants aware of the protocol and purpose of the study. As the interviewee was speaking during the conversation, I was sure to capture detailed notes. I also voice recorded the conversation with the consent of each interviewee. This was to ensure the notes I was taking were detailed and allowed me the ability to go back and add any necessary details if needed. Considering these interviews were semi-structured, participants felt extremely comfortable with the process and provided vivid details about their experiences as it related to the effects of COVID-19 during virtual learning. After completing the interviews, participants were sent their individual transcript to provide feedback and make any necessary revisions. If revisions were recommended, they were made. Once each transcript was confirmed with no changes, I proceeded to coding the interviews to identify commonality and themes. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2013), this study used a systemic six-step thematic analysis to capture patterns in the interviews and capture the experiences of parents and their children. The process involved (a) familiarization with data through transcription, repeated reading and research; (b) generating initial codes by coding meaningful commonalities features across the entire dataset; (c) searching for themes by organizing related codes into themes; (d) reviewing themes by checking coherence against coded extracts and the entire dataset and refining the thematic map; (e) defining and naming

themes by clarifying each theme's scope and relationships; and (f) writing the report by selecting extracts and tying the analysis back to the literature and overall focus of the study.

I used Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step thematic analysis framework, and evidence-based qualitative method that provided a systemic, transparent, and rigorous approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the collected data. The thematic analysis was selected because it allows for inductive (data driven) and deductive (theory informed) exploration of participants' lived experiences. According to Nowell et al. (2017), this method is recognized in qualitative research as a valid and reliable process for capturing meaning with narrative data. Focusing closely on the guidance provided by Braun and Clarke's (2013) systemic six-step thematic analysis, this study followed each step closely in structure to ensure rigor and trustworthiness in the analysis process. To support the organization and management of data, NVivo qualitative analysis software was used as an analytical tool. According to Zamawe (2015), NVivo acts as guide and facilitates the process of the analysis by storing transcripts, creating codes, and enabling visualization of emerging patterns, themes, and relationships. Following Braun and Clarke's model, the analysis processed through six systematic phases: Step 1 Familiarization with data. Following the interviews, I transcribed each conversation verbatim and engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to develop a deep understanding of the participants' narratives. During this stage, I also made initial analytic notes, recorded potential patterns, and noted significant statements that appeared relevant and aligned to the research question. All transcripts were uploaded into NVivo,

which allowed for organization of the qualitative data. In Step 2: Generating initial codes, I systemically reviewed each transcript, identifying and labeling meaningful segments of the text that captured key aspects of the participants' experiences. These codes reflected both explicit statements (semantic content) and underlying meanings (latent content) that related to parents' perceptions of the multifaceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. NVivo was used to assist in the systemic coding on the data by identifying meaningful statements, ideas, and experiences shared by participants. Step 3 was searching for themes. I organized the initial codes into broader categories by grouping similar or related codes together. This process involved identifying patterns and connections across the dataset that reflect shared experiences, challenges, and coping strategies among parents. NVivo's query and visualization tools, such as word frequency queries and cluster analysis, helped reveal relationships among codes and supported the development of groupings that represented shared challenges and coping experiences among parents. In Step 4: Reviewing themes. I closely focused on the preliminary themes for internal coherence, ensuring they accurately represented the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole. NVivo supported this stage by allowing for semi quick retrieval of coded excerpts, making it easier to re-examine data consistency within and across themes. At this stage, some themes were refined, combined, or discarded to produce a clear thematic framework. Step 5 was defining and naming themes. Once themes were finalized, each was clearly defined to reflect its meaning and relationship to the overall research question. NVivo's mapping and structure tools helped illustrate connections between themes. Lastly, Step 6 was writing the report. In the final stage, the five overarching

themes were organized and presented in narrative form explained in Chapter 4. NVivo's assisted with ensuring powerful participant quotations were highlighted to exemplify each theme. Through this systemic and evidence-based process, five overarching themes were developed: adaptation and coping strategies, limited support and resources, mental health impact, parent advocacy, and student emotional distress and dysregulation. These five overarching themes collectively captured how parents of children with learning disabilities perceived and described the multifaceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research question was "How do parents of children with learning disabilities perceive and describe the multifaceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including school closures and virtual learning, on their children's academic performance, the parents' ability to earn a living and maintain their families, as well as the social and mental health of the children?" The themes that support this research question are adaptation and coping strategies, limited support and resources, mental health impact, parent advocacy, and student emotional distress and dysregulation.

This data collection involved a well-diversified group of participants. Focusing first on the parents, 46.2% of those interviewed identified as African American/ Black, 38.5% as Caucasian/White, 7.7% as Asian/Asian American, and the remaining 7.7% as African. The participating parents ranged in age from 33 to 59 years old, contributing well-rounded and comparable perspectives on the topic. Turning to the demographics of the children affected by the COVID-19 pandemic—including school closures and the shift to virtual learning—50% were identified as African American/Black, 25% as

Caucasian/White, 8.3% as African, 8.3% as Multiracial/Mixed Ethnicity, and 8.3% as having White Hispanic heritage. This study was centered around the impact of COVID-19 during the 2020–2021 academic year. When asked about their child’s age during this period, parents reported ages ranging from 4 to 13 years old, corresponding to grade levels from Pre-K through 7th grade. All parents who participated confirmed that their child had either an IEP or a 504 Plan in place. An IEP is a legally binding document developed for each public-school student in the United States who qualifies for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; Yell et al., 2021). The IEP outlines the student’s unique learning needs, the services to be provided, and how progress toward goals will be measured (Yell et al., 2021). In contrast, a 504 Plan, authorized under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, provides accommodations for students who do not meet IDEA eligibility but still require support to access the general education curriculum (Zirkel, 2017). These accommodations may include extended time on assessments, preferential seating, or scheduled breaks (Zirkel, 2017). Table 1 shows the frequency of learning disabilities and related conditions reported by parent participants.

Table 1

Learning Disabilities and Related Conditions Reported

Condition	Frequency
Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)	4
Dyslexia	4
Dysgraphia	3
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	3
Specific learning disability (SLD)	2

Condition	Frequency
Developmental language disorder	1
Auditory processing disorder (APD)	1
Dyscalculia	1
Reading deficit	1
Math deficit	1
Clinical anxiety	1
Hyperlexia	1
Speech and language delay	1
Audio processing delay (APD)	1

Results

To protect the identity of all participating parents, parents were given a pseudo-ID. The participants were labeled Parent 1, Parent 2, Parent 3, and so forth. As mentioned, each participant was allotted 1-hour to complete the interview. To ensure participants fully understood and comprehended every question that was being asked, I made sure I read each question loudly and clearly. If there were any questions the participants did not understand, I was more than happy to repeat the question or provide better clarity. Participants were asked nine open-ended questions about their experience as it relates to the research question - Participants were made aware that the data collected throughout the interview process would help raise continuous awareness for this issue as well as provide solutions of how we can support families of children with learning disabilities during critical moments such as COVID-19.

After analyzing the data gathered, five themes emerged: adaptation and coping strategies, limited support and resources, mental health impact, parent advocacy, and student emotional distress and dysregulation. I explain each theme in its own subsection.

Theme 1: Adaption and Coping Strategies

The first theme that was discovered after conducting interviews was adaptation and coping strategies. This theme was established due to the fact it captured the various ways parents of children with learning disabilities had to adjust to sudden changes during the pandemic and virtual learning. Parents were challenged with new roles that included being educators, therapists, and advocates. With these changes, parents had to develop and implement a wide range of coping mechanisms to maintain educational progress and emotional stability for their children and themselves. These adaptations included establishing structured routines, creating dedicated learning environments at home, engaging in physical activities and sensory breaks, and practicing mindfulness techniques that included calming exercises and breathing techniques. Many parents sought external support through therapy, peer networks, and other online parent groups to manage behavioral challenges. Several parents emphasized the importance of self-care and emotional regulation to protect their own mental health while navigating the uncertainty and intensity of virtual learning during the pandemic. Adaption and coping strategies illustrate resilience within the household and revealed that families worked extremely hard to stabilize their environments despite the limited support from the school districts during this time.

Several parents implemented structured routines or carved out intentional time to maintain a sense of normality and connection. For example, Parent 1 shared, “Automatically, one day a week there is no school—no education. It’s just intentional 1:1 time with either me or my husband, doing something they enjoy. That helped us

reconnect and reset.” This deliberate balance between structure and flexibility allowed families to avoid burnout while prioritizing relational well-being. To address emotional distress, some parents incorporated mindfulness and self-regulation tools into daily life. Parent 3 explained, “We started using breathing exercises when he got overwhelmed. We call it 'bootcamp breathing' and it really helped him calm down and refocus.” These strategies helped children maintain focus and manage the anxiety triggered by screen fatigue and academic frustration. Parents also had to adjust their expectations of progress and success. Parent 6 expressed, “I had to learn to adjust and adapt to new expectations. My child was three levels behind, and that was okay. We created checklists and routines so he could feel independent even when he needed help.” By focusing on growth over perfection, parents found ways to adapt and cope with the changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 2: Limited Support and Resources

The second theme that was discovered after conducting interviews was limited support and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme was established because it truly highlighted significance and how the absence of educational, financial, and emotional support during the COVID-19 pandemic truly impacted families raising children with learning disabilities. This theme highlighted systemic gaps including the challenges of school closures and virtual learning, affecting children’s academic progress, parent’s work capacity/ability to work, and the well-being of the overall family. Diving deeper into Theme 2, many parents expressed they felt abandoned by their school district and were left to navigate the complexity of their child’s special education needs without

proper guidance, resources, or support from the schools. For instance, Parent 9 shared “I did not receive any support from the school system. It was more stressful. I was exhausted from work. It was a nonstop routine.” Similarly, Parent 2 emphasized the emotional toll she felt during this time, “I was not able to work. I had to be right there with my son daily when he logged on. The psychologist tried to help, but she was having a breakdown too.”

This theme is valid because it was extremely common amongst most families that were interviewed. This theme also highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic amplified existing inequities and created additional stressors that significantly hindered students’ academic performance and caused disruption in the livelihood of households (mentally, emotionally, and physical). Academically, children were often left without accommodations legally entitled to them under IEPs or 504 Plans. Parent 3 explained, “The school was not super helpful. The counselor showing up at the house felt invasive. We spent over \$1,000 a month just to get my son the support he needed.” This theme demonstrated the lack of institutional support forcing many families to seek expensive alternatives or go without essential services for their children's needs during this time. This theme is valid because it highlights the commonalities in systemic failure to provide equitable resources during a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 3: Mental Health Impact

The third theme that was discovered after conducting interviews was mental health impact during the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme was established due to the consistency it revealed beyond academic setbacks and financial strains; families were

significantly affected by the toll the pandemic took on their emotional well-being. Theme 3 focuses on the overall psychological well-being of both parents and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Theme 3 focuses on the sustained mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and emotional exhaustion that developed or worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Families expressed how the sudden transition to virtual learning, isolation from peer support, and the lack of adequate services was stressful to both the child and the supporting parent(s). This theme is valid because many parents described emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness in many cases during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Parent 3 shared, “It was ‘Hell’; it was really hard and incredibly emotional... Parents should not have to fight so hard for what is already supposed to be free.” This specific quote demonstrated the emotional trauma parents endured while advocating for their child’s needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Parent 7 said, “I drank a lot... I lost a lot of weight... My son withdrew, but I made sure to watch him closely and implemented incentives to help him feel better.” This is another quote that validates the theme of mental health impact. This quote reflects how the pressures of caregiving, grief, and isolation affected parental mental health, while also exemplifying resilience and creativity parents exhibited to best support their children emotionally during this time.

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic causing mental distress to parents, children, too, showed signs of distress. Parent 11 expressed the following, “Reading and writing was pain, he would literally break pencils and tear paper... His ADHD is internalized, and when his emotions come out, it’s anger. I had to not react because it

would only make it worse.” This is another example of how the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the mental health of parents and their children during this time. Parent 3 expressed, "I had a panic attack. It was just so much. I was crying a lot, and even though we switched schools, we're still working on his anxiety today." This quote exemplifies how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted families' mental health in the moment and long-term beyond the pandemic era. This theme is valid because the trauma and toll impacted the overall psychological well-being of both parents and children during the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in mental health impact.

Theme 4: Parent Advocacy

The fourth theme that was discovered after conducting interviews was parent advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Theme 4 was established due to parents finding a voice during this time. During the interviews, many parents mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic increased their involvement and assertiveness in their child's education. As schools transitioned to remote learning and special education and support services became inconsistent or unavailable during the pandemic, many parents expressed how they had to step into advocacy. Parents expressed they had to be the voice to ensure their child's academic, emotional, and developmental needs were addressed during the pandemic and after. The theme parent advocacy is valid because it demonstrated the COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point for many parents. The pandemic sparked a deep understanding for parents to understand their child's needs and rights. For example, Parent 3 stated, "The pandemic was a lifesaver because it opened my eyes to what my child needed... I learned so much about my rights as a parent. I ended

up filing a due process against the school.” In addition, Parent 4 shared, “Advocacy became a bigger thing for me. I gained a better understanding of public schools and had to push more to get what my son needed.” Parent 9 stated, “COVID-19 made me realize I needed to advocate more... I learned to speak up and have a voice and be involved.” Parent advocacy is a valid theme because it was extremely common and mentioned in every interview during the data collection process.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic heightened parents’ awareness of educational gaps and encouraged them to demand services and accountability. Parent advocacy is relevant and a valid theme because it was a common topic and it provides validity to the research question. This theme revealed, while the pandemic posed many barriers to academic performance, economic stability, and emotional well-being, it also activated advocacy among parents. Theme 4 revealed that parents became more involved of their child’s educational pathways to ensure success. Parent voices became crucial to identifying inequities in the educational landscape, demanding accommodations, and pushing for systemic changes. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, parents became aware of their rights in hopes to reshape how they perceive and engage with their child’s education now and in the future.

Theme 5: Emotional Distress and Dysregulation

Before presenting the findings of Theme 5, it is important to clarify how Theme 5 differs from Theme 3 (Mental Health Impact), as both involve emotional and psychological experiences that emerged from the data. Theme 3 (Mental Health Impact) captures the broader, long-term psychological well-being of both parents and children

during and after the pandemic. This includes sustained mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and burnout that participants described as ongoing or diagnosed. These were impacts that developed over time and reflected chronic stressors (more long-term). In the session above regarding Theme 3 (Mental Health Impact), parents discussed their children being diagnosed with clinical anxiety, their own experiences with panic attacks, and ongoing emotional fatigue. In contrast, Theme 5 (Student Emotional Distress and Dysregulation) focuses more on immediate, short-term emotional and behavioral reactions students exhibited during virtual learning. Theme 5 emerged from parents' repeated references to "meltdowns," "outbursts," and "emotional overloads" that occurred in real time as their children struggled to regulate their emotions in the moments of academic challenges and sensory challenges.

While Theme 3 (Mental Health Impact) and Theme 5 (Emotional Distress and Dysregulation) are similar, they are different and unique in their own way throughout this research. Theme 3 focuses on the overall psychological well-being of both parents and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Theme 3 focuses on the sustained mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and emotional exhaustion that developed or worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Theme 5 focuses on children's in-the-moment emotional and behavioral reactions during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as meltdowns, tantrums, frustration, and difficulty self-regulating. Theme 5 reflects the immediate consequences of virtual learning disruptions on emotional regulation and control. This differentiation became evident during the theme review and definition phase of the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). While Theme 3 (Mental

Health Impact) captures long-term internalized distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress), Theme 5 (Emotional Distress and Dysregulation) captures situational, observable expressions of emotional strain triggered by the complexity of remote learning. For example, one parent stated, “Reading and writing was a pain; he would literally break pencils and tear paper.” While another parent stated, “After school we would go to various parks so he could decompress.” These examples reflect emotional responses, distinct from the ongoing psychological toll captured under Theme 3 (Mental Health Impact).

Focusing on Theme 5 (Emotional Distress and Dysregulation), according to American Psychological Association (n.d.), emotional dysregulation is a broad psychological concept referring to difficulties in managing the strength and nature of emotions, such as fear, anger, or sadness in a way that allows for appropriate responses. It involves challenges with emotional over reactivity, mood swings, heightened excitability, and difficulty returning to a calm or stable emotional state. Theme 5 was established due to the fact it captured how children with learning disabilities experienced heightened emotional dysregulation due to the abrupt shift in routines, isolation from peers, and lack of in-person support. These are all factors that significantly affected the children’s ability to focus academically and maintain emotional stability. Parents had to account for behavioral responses and triggers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which caused emotional dysregulation, causing “meltdowns” in many households during this time. Emotional dysregulations not only impacted the child; however, but it also had an impact on the parent that was trying to regulate, de-escalate, and normalize their child’s

behaviors during a period of abnormality. The theme of mental health impact revealed that the emotional strain influenced children's ability to engage with school and parents' capacity to work or function effectively. The findings from the research revealed that mental health was strongly impacted during this time and families are still struggling to bounce back and heal from the long-lasting trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the interview process, several parents described their child exhibiting signs of distress, frustration, and emotional overload. Parent 11 recalled, "Reading and writing was pain—my son would literally break pencils and tear paper. He would say 'I cannot do this' and would need an adult to help regulate him." This is an example of many as to why emotional distress and dysregulation is a valid theme for this research. This quote represents the toll virtual learning had on children, particularly those that were struggling with academic demands and attention-related challenges like ADHD. Parent 4 emphasized the importance of emotional regulation techniques, stating, "After school we would go to various parks so my son could decompress... If he was calm enough, we would go back to class." Similarly, Parent 9 described her experiences with her child's emotions by stating, "My son received cool down time... I give him time to regroup between school and homework. I prioritize sleep daily." These are two examples that valid why emotional distress and dysregulation was a theme that represented commonality. These are all examples of how parents had to implement real-time interventions to help their child manage 'meltdowns' and reengage in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Emotional distress and dysregulation relate to the research question because this theme highlights how these experiences affected parent's ability to maintain stability during this time. Theme 5 directly addressed the research question because it addresses how the pandemic socially and mentally impacted the well-being of children with learning disabilities. The transition to virtual learning, disruption of routines, and reduced access to support services led to a significant increase in emotional distress and dysregulation among children particularly those with learning disabilities. Every parent interviewed referenced "meltdowns" as a consistent and defining experience during the pandemic. The "meltdowns" indicated not only academic strain but also overwhelming emotional and behavioral responses from their children. Meltdowns often stemmed from students' frustration with online platforms, their inability to understand the assignments, sensory overwhelm, or the absence of structured and guided support. Parent 3 shared, "The teacher would keep teaching even though my son wasn't keeping up, and that frustration led to constant meltdowns—I spent over \$1,000 a month on extra support." This quote represents the collective narratives. The term "meltdowns" in parent testimonies illustrates the emotional toll of virtual learning. This term also highlights the critical importance of mental health, designing trauma-informed and emotionally supportive learning environments moving forward to support children with and without learning disabilities especially during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary, the data were analyzed using Braun and Clark's (2013) six-step thematic analysis framework, which provided a systemic and rigorous approach to identifying and interpreting patterns within the interview data. The process involved

multiple rounds of coding, theme implementation and development, and refinement to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the participants lived experiences. Through this analysis, five overarching themes emerged: Adaptation and Coping Strategies, Limited Support and Resources, Mental Health Impact, Parent Advocacy, and Student Emotional Distress and Dysregulation. As a collective, these themes captured the multifaceted ways in which parents of children with learning disabilities perceived and described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including its effects on academic performance, family stability, and both parent and child well-being. The five overarching themes provided a comprehensive foundation for understanding the emotional, educational, and social measurements explored throughout this study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is determined by four highly scoring factors – credibility, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Nowell et al., 2017). Trustworthiness is necessary regarding qualitative research because it tells the story of the research and supports the accuracy of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure the trustworthiness of my research, I recorded and transcribed the data with the consent of all participants to certify trust and truth throughout the research. Before the research project started, I was certain to provide a consent and demographic form so that all participants were aware of what the study entailed. I also made myself available at any point during the study to address any questions or concerns. During the interviews I was certain to repeat questions multiple times to make sure participants understood what was being asked. Participants expressed many levels of comfort and did not mind asking me to

explain if there was something they did not quite understand. All transcripts were emailed to participants for feedback. In the evident modifications were necessary, participants were sure to let me know and edits were made. I allowed participants to be a part of the process to truly tell their story and express their needs. The process consisted of smooth transitions and is something that can be replicated.

To ensure the study is creditable, the study involved detailed interviews with participants, allowing for a meaningful understanding of their lived experiences. This level of engagement allowed me to establish relationships, clarify responses, and ensure a complete understanding of the issues at hand. Transferability is identified as the “quality criterion” of qualitative research (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). Trustworthiness enhances the transferability of research findings. This qualitative study allowed participants a space to be vulnerable and truly tell their story. The participants that participated were extremely diverse and located in different districts, yet expressing and experiencing the same needs. This study provided detailed descriptions of participants’ experiences, truly demonstrating the challenges faced by families during the pandemic. This allows other researchers, educators, or policymakers to continuously find ways to support families, particularly for families raising children with learning disabilities. The study clearly focused on the data within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual learning, making it easier for readers to understand the specific factors at play.

According to Janis (2022), dependability is known as the consistency of research. This study used semi-structured interview protocols, which were consistent across all participants. This ensured that each participant was asked the same questions, reducing

variability in the data collection process and enhancing the dependability of the findings. Lastly, according to Nassaji (2020), the confirmability principle refers to how credible the study's conclusions and findings are judged to be. Triangulation involved using multiple data sources, which helped ensure that the findings were not based on a single perspective. By cross-checking the data from different participants, I was able to confirm that the conclusions drawn were rooted in the participants' actual experiences.

Summary

This qualitative study presented the voices and lived experiences of 12 parents navigating the educational and emotional challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in the context of raising children with learning disabilities. Through a series of nine open-ended questions, participants reflected on their children's unique needs, the struggles of at-home learning, emotional impacts, financial hardships, and the gaps in systemic support. Their stories revealed both the strain and the strength that defined their pandemic journeys. Parents participating in this study represented diverse racial, socioeconomic, and family backgrounds, with children diagnosed with various learning disabilities including autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, developmental delays, and anxiety. All children were identified as having either an IEP or 504 Plan in place. All the children required specific accommodations such as sensory breaks, structured environments, or one-on-one attention, needs that were difficult to meet in a virtual setting during the pandemic. Parents faced overwhelming challenges during virtual learning. Children experienced feelings of anxiety, social withdrawals, regression, and emotional outbursts "melt downs." Parents experienced

increased stress, guilt, and burnout during this time. Financial strain and hardship were a common theme, especially for those participants that were paying out-of-pocket for tutoring, therapy, or technology. Parents became innovative during this time by implementing a wide range of coping strategies that worked for the families' dynamics. Additionally, the pandemic exposed educational gaps and empowered many to become stronger advocates. Parents reflected on their pandemic experiences with mixed emotions - some with pride and resilience, others with lasting anger, sadness, or trauma. Nevertheless, all participants appreciated the opportunity and space to be a part of this study and share their stories.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the perceptions provided by parents of children with learning disabilities regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, regarding school closures and the shift to virtual learning. This study was conducted to raise awareness and ensure children with learning disabilities are getting the supports and services needed to sustain in the PK-12 education system and beyond. Nine interview questions were used to collect the data for the qualitative study.

1. How would you describe your child's experience with virtual learning during the pandemic particularly considering their learning disability?
2. Can you specify the challenges you faced in supporting your child's education at home during the pandemic?
3. Can you describe any changes you've noticed in you and your child's emotional well-being or mental health since the onset of the pandemic and virtual learning?
4. Can you describe the support you had as a parent rather it was financial or support with remote learning?
5. How did the transition to virtual learning affect your ability to work and provide for your family financially?
6. What strategies or coping mechanisms have you implemented to support you and your child's emotional and social needs during this challenging time?

7. Have there been any positive outcomes for you or your child as a result of the pandemic and virtual learning?
8. Looking ahead, what support or assistance do you feel would be most beneficial for your child and your family as you navigate the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on education and daily life?
9. To conclude, after discussing everything and reflecting on the challenges your child and family faced during the pandemic, how does it make you feel as a parent to have voiced these experiences out loud?

To begin this study, I knew I wanted parent's perspective. I interviewed 12 participants to truly hear the experiences of how the shift to virtual learning impacted their households. Virtual learning severely changed both how education was delivered and the setting in which it occurred for students with special educational needs and disabilities (Dvorsky et al., 2023). These shifts led to inadequate learning outcomes, as many students experienced substantial learning setbacks due to fewer essential learning opportunities, weakened support systems, and restricted access to services typically provided outside of the school environment (Dvorsky et al., 2023). Chapter 2 was a detailed literature review which painted a complex picture of the pandemic's educational, emotional, and financial toll on families of children with learning disabilities. I highlighted the dynamic role of parental advocacy, the importance of mental health and community support, and the urgent need for systemic reforms to ensure that vulnerable learners are not left behind in times of crisis. In Chapter 3, I gave a high-level overview of the data process and methodology. In Chapter 4, I discussed the finding and

thoroughly discussed how the process happened. To collect the data for Chapter 4, I conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Each participant was allotted 1-hour to share their experience by answering nine open-ended questions. This was a moment of truth and vulnerability for all participants to share their experiences.

Interpretation of Findings

Guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological system theory, the findings of this study exemplified that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families raising children with learning disabilities intercepted across multiple, interconnected systems shaping children's development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory explains that child development is influenced by interactions within and between the microsystem (family-school interactions), mesosystem (relationships between home and school), exosystem (educational and policy-level systems), macrosystem (cultural and societal norms), and the chronosystem (time based change - the pandemic as a historical event and shock). The results of this study show that disruptions across these ecological layers such as inconsistent IEP/504 implementation, reduced school/family collaboration, and systemic inequalities had an overall impact on the children's academic performance, social-emotional regulation, and the well-being of the families.

Addressing the academic performance and schooling, the data confirmed a noticeable decline in academic performance during the pandemic, supporting prior research that documented learning loss during the initial phases of virtual instruction (see Tomasik et al., 2020). Parents reported that their children struggled with reading, writing, comprehension, mirroring findings by Engzell et al. (2021) that students from

disadvantaged backgrounds suffered greater academic setbacks than their peers. These outcomes were compounded by schools' difficulty in maintaining individualized services and accommodations mandated by IEPs and 504 plans (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The findings reinforce the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2022) report showing that students with disabilities faced disproportionate barriers to equitable education due to technology gaps and inconsistency of services. Parents in this study described how these lapses translated in lost instructional time, highlighting the breakdown of the microsystem-level support (teacher/student/parent relationships) and the exosystem-level policies.

Next, addressing the parent's load, coping, and home learning environments, parents described the overwhelming experience of managing dual roles as educators and caregivers while balancing professional work obligations. These experiences echo the findings of Reeves (2021), who stated that parents faced compounded pressures around technology, mental health, and time management during virtual learning. Similarly, Spinelli et al. (2020) and Ogurlu et al. (2020) found that parents established structured routines and created home learning environments as coping mechanisms, yet this came at the cost of increased parental stress. Participants in this study demonstrated similar strategies such as daily schedules, sensory breaks, and structured learning zones but reported exhaustion and emotional strain when resources were limited. These findings extend the literature by exemplifying how parents of children with disabilities not only implemented these coping mechanisms but adapted them specifically to address their children's sensory and learning needs.

Then addressing mental health and emotional dysregulation, data revealed a distinction between chronic health challenges and acute emotional dysregulation. Parents reported persistent stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, findings consistent with Patrick et al. (2020) and Prime et al. (2020), who found significant declines in parental well-being due to caregiving burdens and financial instability. Mothers in particular carried a disproportionate emotional and logistical load, aligning with Collins et al. (2020), who documented gender disparities in work and caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic. Conversely, children exemplified emotional dysregulation, manifested through meltdowns, frustration, and mood swing. This aligns with Loades et al. (2020), who found that isolation and disrupted routines contributed to emotional volatility in children, and Singh et al. (2020), who observed that social withdrawal increased behavioral issues. It is important to note, the differentiation between Theme 3 and 5 reflects two interconnected yet distinct layers of the ecological model: Theme 3 represents enduring mental health strain at the macrolevels and exo levels (parental stress, systemic inequalities), while Theme 5 captures microlevel of distress in the daily home/school interactions (meltdowns and regulation struggles).

Addressing the limited support and resource gaps, parents' narrative of limited support mirror prior research showing that many school districts struggled to deliver equitable special education services during virtual learning (National Cental for Special Education Research, 2021). In this study, parents described losing access to tutoring programs, counseling, and one-on-one services and support services. These experiences align with Rakap et al. (2023) and Kilinc et al. (2023), who found that families of

children with disabilities experienced increased mental, physical, and financial burdens due to the suspension of therapy and intervention services. The loss of these supports reflects systemic inequities at the exosystem level, which directly affected the microsystem functioning of families. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2022) and Bařaran and Aksoy (2020) reported that limited technology access and inadequate communication between schools and parents hindered continuity. Parents in the study expressed frustration with delayed responses from schools and insufficient communication about their children's progress. These were factors that intensified feelings of isolation and helplessness.

Addressing parent advocacy and school/community partnerships, I found that the pandemic prompted many parents to become advocates for their children's educational rights and services. Parents described learning about special education laws, contacting administrators, and even pursuing alternative educational options. These findings align with Reeves (2021) and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2021), who emphasized the rise of parent-led advocacy during the pandemic. In this study, advocacy emerged as both a response to systemic failure and a mechanism of parent power (empowerment). Parents who engaged with advocacy networks or peer support groups, as noted by Rakap et al. (2023), reported stronger collaboration with schools and improved confidence in navigating educational systems. From a Bronfenbrenner perspective, this finding highlights the importance of mesosystem interactions (the dynamic relationships between family and school systems). When these relationships were strengthened through advocacy and communication, families reported

greater emotional stability and academic consistency. While on the other hand, weak mesosystem connections heightened stress and reduced trust in educational institutions as it did for the parents that participated in this study.

Lastly, addressing economic stability and caregiver capacity, economic instability was a major factor influencing parents' ability to support virtual learning. Consistent with Gould and Kassa (2021), families reported job loss, reduced work hours, and financial insecurity. Mothers, in particular, experienced significant employment disruption, echoing Del Boca et al. (2020) and Collin et al. (2020), who highlighted the gendered economic impact of the pandemic. Parents in this study described sacrificing work opportunities or financial stability as priorities for their children's education and well-being, emphasizing how financial and emotional strain often co-occurred. These findings reinforce Prime et al.'s (2020) conclusion that family well-being depends on the interplay between economic security, social support, and emotional health across systems.

The findings of this study revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic truly impacted families raising children with learning disabilities across educational, emotional, and systemic dimensions. Using Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis framework, five overarching themes emerged: adaptation and coping strategies, limited support and resources, mental health impact, parent advocacy, and student emotional distress and dysregulation. Each theme represented a distinct and interconnected aspect of parental experience. The results show that academic regression and emotional instability among children were not solely consequences of remote learning, but rather reflections of broader systemic failures in implementing individualized supports, sustaining consistent

communication, and addressing mental health needs. Parents' narratives emphasized resilience, as many developed innovative coping strategies, sought therapy (and are still seeking therapy), and became advocates for their children's rights. These findings align closely with Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, demonstrating how disruptions across multiple ecological systems – from family and school interactions (microsystem and mesosystem) to district policies and cultural attitudes (exosystem and macrosystem) jointly shaped outcomes for children and families. Collectively, the study extends existing literature by providing an understanding of how parents navigated educational inequalities, emotional challenges, and advocacy roles during an unprecedented global crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations

Throughout this entire process, I learned a lot along the way and heard amazing stories from participants who are truly passionate parents. However, with every study there are limitations and ways in which the study can be replicated and enhanced. The first limitation was the small sample size. The sample size of this study was 12 participants. Data saturation was reached quickly. This research study had specific qualifications which limited certain individuals from being about to participate. Another limitation was the homogenous sample size. This study only captured the perspective the of females, not intentionally but mothers were the only ones who signed up to interview. While conducting the interview, the mother's shared their household experiences which captured their husband's perspective; however, it was not the direct perspective of the father's involvement. Another limitation was the representation of children's voices.

Although the study focuses on the experiences of parents, in the future it would be nice to hear the perspective of the child as it relates to their emotional and academic experiences during virtual learning while navigating a learning disability. This will bring a different angle of conversation and will require parental supervision due to mental capacity and minor age restrictions; however, the perspective of the child could enhance the research. Another limitation was the lack of longitudinal data. Lastly, as with all qualitative research, there is the potential for researcher bias in how responses are interpreted, coded, and reported. Although strategies such as member checking were used to ensure trustworthiness, my own background and perspective can be influenced by the framing or emphasis of certain themes. I have worked in education for the past 9 years. I have witnessed educational issues from the lens of several aspects; however, I was sure to remove any of my personal biases. To ensure my personal biases were removed, I shared the transcripts with each participant to make sure the data and transcripts were valid and correct.

Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the perceptions provided by parents of children with learning disabilities regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, regarding school closures and the shift to virtual learning. The first recommendation would be to increase the sample size. Like with any study, the more responses the stronger the outcome. I would also recommend an extension of this study that focuses on male perspective. Considering the biological framework and psychological framework of men and women are different it would be

nice to hear the direct experiences of dad's or male caregivers as it relates to the impact of the pandemic. Also, in most household men are classified as the provider and considering the financial dynamics in many households shifted during the pandemic it would be nice to hear the viewpoints of males. Another recommendation would be to review the IEP or 504 plan with the caregiver's consent to gain a better understanding of the specific accommodations and services required for each child. I understand this is a sensitive topic, and in the U.S., learning disabilities are legally recognized. Public schools identify students with learning disabilities through various assessments and documentation, which may qualify them for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). However, every child's IEP or 504 plan is tailored to their unique needs. It would be beneficial to dig deeper into understanding these needs and accommodations to better voice each child's individual requirements through the research and thoroughly understand the services specific to that child's learning style.

Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the perceptions provided by parents of children with learning disabilities regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, regarding school closures and the shift to virtual learning. The shift to virtual learning had an impact on every parent that participated in this study. The themes that supported the research were Adaptation and Coping Strategies, Limited Support and Resources, Mental Health Impact, Parent Advocacy, and Student Emotional Distress and Dysregulation. During the pandemic and after the

pandemic parents truly discovered the needs of their children were not being met based off the accommodations listed in the IEP and 504 plan. Participants realized their children needed more than what was being offered, resulting in parents having to advocate, demand appropriate services, and spend extra money to ensure their children were getting what they needed to thrive.

This study emphasizes the critical role parents play as advocates for their children's educational and emotional well-being. Many participants reported that the pandemic was a turning point that forced them to become more engaged and assertive in navigating IEPs, 504 plans, and access to services. Another significant implication for social change is the urgent need to normalize and expand access to mental health services for both students and caregivers. Many parents in this study described emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and trauma as key parts of their pandemic experience. Similarly, children exhibited signs of emotional distress resulting in dysregulation, withdrawal, and behavioral challenges. This emphasizes the need for more mental health support in schools and the community in general. We will continue to see social change occur when mental health is treated as a primary concern and not as a secondary concern, because it is a key component of the family's well-being.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of parents raising children with learning disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study revealed how the sudden shift to virtual learning reshaped educational access, emotional well-being, financial stability, and family dynamics. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Theory (1977), the findings demonstrated that the challenges families faced were not isolated incidents but reflections of multi-systemic breakdowns across educational, social, and policy environments. At the microsystem level, parents struggled to recreate structured learning spaces and manage emotional dysregulation. While at the mesosystem level, communication gaps between homes and schools destroyed trust and collaboration. The exosystem revealed institutional and policy failures in IEP and 504 plan implementations. The macrosystem revealed cultural stigma surrounding mental health and inequities in special education access. Over time, within the chronosystem, parents adapted, becoming advocates and innovators for their children's needs, and they are still advocating. The study's themes: Adaptation and Coping Strategies, Limited Support and Resources, Mental Health Impact, Parent Advocacy, and Student Emotional Distress and Dysregulation collectively illustrated the resilience and strength parents demonstrated despite systemic failures. These results align with existing findings (Reeves, 2021; Kilinc et al., 2023; Rakap et al., 2023), reinforcing that the pandemic enhanced inequities while highlighting families' capacity for advocacy and adaptation. This qualitative research affirms that supporting children with learning disabilities requires a collaborative, trauma-informed, and equity-centered approach that strengthens family and school partnerships and enforces mental health within education reform. The pandemic reminded us that sustainable change begins with empowering families and ensuring every child receives the quality education and the services they deserve!

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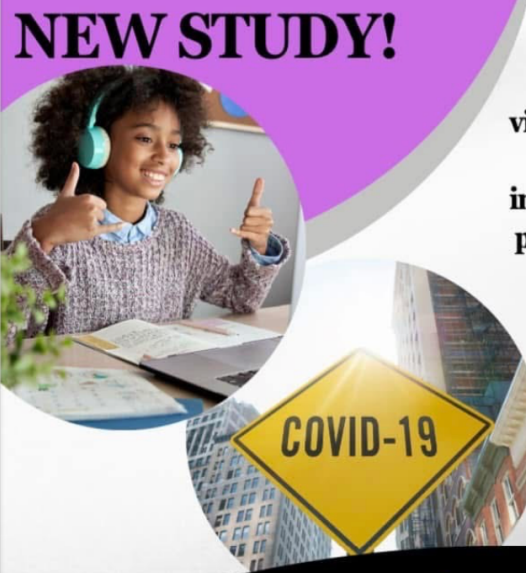
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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your child's experience with virtual learning during the pandemic particularly considering their learning disability?
2. Can you specify the challenges you faced in supporting your child's education at home during the pandemic?
3. Can you describe any changes you've noticed in you and your child's emotional well-being or mental health since the onset of the pandemic and virtual learning?
4. Can you describe the support you had as a parent rather it was financial or support with remote learning?
5. How did the transition to virtual learning affect your ability to work and provide for your family financially?
6. What strategies or coping mechanisms have you implemented to support you and your child's emotional and social needs during this challenging time?
7. Have there been any positive outcomes for you or your child as a result of the pandemic and virtual learning?
8. Looking ahead, what support or assistance do you feel would be most beneficial for your child and your family as you navigate the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on education and daily life?
9. To conclude, after discussing everything and reflecting on the challenges your child and family faced during the pandemic, how does it make you feel as a parent to have voiced these experiences out loud?

Appendix: Recruitment Flyer


NEW STUDY!



There is a new study about the experiences of parents and the impact of COVID-19 related virtual learning on parents raising children with learning disabilities. For this study, you are invited to share the specific challenges faced as a parent of children with learning disabilities and the innovative strategies you have employed to address these challenges during COVID-19.


Interested in participating?

Click [HERE](#) or Scan the QR Code to consent & participate.




About the study!

- One 60 minute phone interview that will be audio recorded (no videorecording).
- All volunteers will receive a \$20 Visa gift card as a thank you!
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you.



Volunteers **MUST** meet these requirements:



- Must be 18 years or older.
- The parent/legal guardian must be fluent in English.
- Must reside in the United States.
- Must be the parent or legal guardian of a child with a diagnosed learning disability who was enrolled in Grades K-12 during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Must have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of school closures and the transition to virtual learning, which affected the child's academic performance, the parent's economic stability, and the child's social and mental well-being.
- The child's learning disability must have been diagnosed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the U.S., a learning disability is a legal designation. Public schools identify students with learning disabilities through various assessments and documentation, which may qualify them for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Ty'Sheka Lambert, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during December 2024 and January 2025 if necessary.

To confidentially volunteer, contact the researcher:
tysheka.lambert@waldenu.edu
You are welcome to share with others that may be interested!