COVID-19 Pandemic and Special Education Teacher Voices

Rama Cousik
Purdue University Fort Wayne, cousikr@pfw.edu

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Abstract

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 created havoc in schools across the world as it necessitated school closures and lockdowns, and/or a sudden switch to an online mode of learning. Although all children and teachers were adversely affected, children with disabilities faced additional problems. Special education teachers bore the burden of having to continue providing high quality special education in the face of these challenges. In this paper, I present findings from a survey of special education teachers through use of qualitative and arts-based research technics.

Keywords

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Rama Cousik

Purdue University, FW, Indiana, USA

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 created havoc in schools across the world as it necessitated school closures and lockdowns, and/or a sudden switch to an online mode of learning. Although all children and teachers were adversely affected, children with disabilities faced additional problems. Special education teachers bore the burden of having to continue providing high quality special education in the face of these challenges. In this paper, I present findings from a survey of special education teachers through use of qualitative and arts-based research technics.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, Arts Based Research (ABR), special education teachers, children, disabilities, poetry, visual art

COVID-19 Pandemic and Special Education Teacher Voices

Despite the trauma created by the pandemic, and resulting lockdowns, school closures, and sudden switch to online instruction, special and general education teachers never stopped teaching and faced immense challenges (Aizawa et al., 2021; Frederick et al., 2020; Gökbulut et al., 2021; van der Spoel et al. 2020; Wood et al. 2021, Yulianti & Mukminin, 2021). Burke (2020) states that "… as of March 19, 2020, 44 states had closed 104,000 schools, affecting nearly 48 million students." Although all children faced the negative effects of school closure it was worse for children with disabilities (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2022). According to recent reports by the US Department of Education, more than 6.3 million children aged 6-21 are served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2020). Because most of these children received direct services from an array of specialists, school closure denied many children access to essential services that were critical to their progress. For example, students were denied supports provided by paraprofessionals such as behavior specialists (Frederick et al., 2020). Hurwitz et al. (2022) state that "[s]chool closures and related pivoting between learning modalities were difficult for all students, but especially for students with autism, who rely on routine and often require individualized instruction" (p. 889). Hirsch et al. (2022) surveyed an array of school personnel including special education teachers and found that although support services for students with emotional behavior disorders were provided via online instruction, unclear federal policies and guidelines put the students at risk of not achieving their IEP goals.

In a study of 477 districts across the US, Gross and Opalka (2020) reported that "[f]ar too many districts are leaving learning to chance during the coronavirus closures" as district were not particularly expecting teachers to teach and monitor student progress (p. 1). Burleigh et al. (2022) used photo voice to tell compelling accounts of teachers as they scrambled to begin teaching online when the lockdown began. Teachers were doubly challenged as they had to simultaneously monitor their own children's homeschooling and teach online classes "…at the cost to their personal mental health and wellness." Yulianti and Mukminin (2021) interviewed teachers and found key issues related to access to technology, lack of teacher preparedness, and additional problems for children who were disadvantaged, from low-income families and those living in rural areas. Rasmitadila et al. (2020) found that the change in instructional

delivery affected student learning due to lack of time for creating effective curriculum, student motivation and participation, and technology issues. According to the AAP (2021), the continued pandemic has increased mental health problems in children, adolescents, and families.

Regardless, teachers are mainly held accountable for children's achievement. Having worked as a special education teacher myself for nearly three decades, and as a college professor since slightly more than a decade, I fully empathize with teachers' experiences during these challenging times. In addition, there are very few studies that have elicited the special education teachers' perspectives about challenges during the pandemic. Hence this study is significant because it elicits the inputs of special education teachers about their teaching experiences during and after the pandemic, what supports they had or needed, and their recommendations for various agencies.

Current Study

The aim of the study was to understand challenges faced by special education teachers during the pandemic in providing appropriate special education to students with disabilities. Based on findings in the published literature, I created a survey to find out the challenges faced by special education teachers during the pandemic. To strengthen its validity, I sent a copy of the survey questions to a fellow faculty member, who read the questions and agreed with the logical order, terminology, clarity of questions, response options, and continuity among questions. He also agreed that the survey questions were addressing the research purpose.

Special education teachers in one public school district in a Midwestern city in the U.S. participated in the study. Upon approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I requested the school district officer to send out the anonymous survey on my behalf to these teachers. The recruitment email consisted of an invitation to participate in the study with a secure link to the survey. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study, minimal associated risks, and potential benefits of the findings to the field. The IRB did not require informed consent by the participants, as it was an anonymous survey, and the eleven-item survey did not ask for personal information such as names, email addresses, contact details of participants, and specific location of schools or residences. Questions one through eight asked information about gender, designation, type of school district, age, years of experience, number of students, and grade levels. Question nine required participants to select responses for problems they faced while teaching. It also allowed open ended responses to describe the problems that were not listed. Question ten asked for qualitative information on the support they received, and question eleven, recommendations. I sent a reminder to complete the survey after two weeks from the first email invitation. Survey results were securely stored. The data was collected between last week of November and December 2021.

The survey was sent to 272 special education teachers, and 51(18%) teachers responded. Given the teachers were still experiencing the ill effects of the pandemic, the response rate was quite satisfactory. One response was dropped from the analysis as the survey was incomplete. The final total of responses was 50 – three preschool, four kindergarten, twelve elementary, 15 middle school, and 16 high school teachers completed the survey.

Methodology

In this paper I use qualitative and arts-based methodologies to analyze and present data. In the first section of analysis, I use a combination of found poetry, drawings (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Leavy, 2017) and infographic (Davis & Quinn, 2013) to represent data. In the next section of analysis, I use Graneheim and Lundman (2004)'s method to analyze questions ten

and eleven and develop codes, categories, and themes from the responses. Graneheim and Lundman reiterate the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research, and that "…the concepts credibility, dependability and transferability have been used to describe various aspects of trustworthiness" (p. 109). I strived to achieve credibility by recruiting participants most suited to answer the research questions, i.e., special education teachers who taught during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dependability was achieved by ensuring there was enough participants and variability in the responses, and finally, transferability was achieved by providing a detailed description of the context and findings from the study (Graneheim et al., 2017).

Found Poetry and Infographics

Within the realm of arts-based research, poetic inquiry serves as a powerful medium to present data to readers in an evocative and compelling way because of its ability to capture feelings and emotions of the speaker and the spoken (in this case the researcher and their participants). Poetic inquiry has been effectively used by qualitative researchers including myself across disciplines (Cousik, 2008, 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2019; Cousik et al., 2017; Faulkner, 2017; Görlich, 2016; McCulliss, 2013; Prendergast et al., 2009; Van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019; Wiebe, 2015).

According to Brady (2009),

> Poetic methods are qualitative and call for self-conscious participation. Instead of being inverted like a telescope for a distancing effect, poetics turns it back around for magnified encounters with life as lived, up close and personal, and sets it in a mode where everything reported is proprietary, overtly as the authors write about their presence in the research or implicitly on the strength of always claiming the representations as a personal product (interpretation) of sorts. (p. xi-xii)

Found poetry is one form of poetic method/inquiry where participants' verbal expressions during interviews or their responses to survey questions can be crystallized to tell their stories. According to Reilly et al. (2018), "A found poem is created by taking words, phrases, and whole passages from other sources (e.g., interview transcripts) and reframing them as poetry by changing the spacing, order, and/or lines" (pp. 197-198).

Infographics and Drawings

Similarly, arts-based inquiry allows data representation through pictures, infographics, word clouds and webs, and the latter two methods have gained attention due to advances in technology. Condensing complex data sets to visuals makes data more accessible and reaches a wider range of audience (CACM Staff, 2014). Infographics are visual representations of data and according to Davis and Quinn (2013) infographics "are modern, written artifacts about collected resources in a dynamic, visual format" (p. 16).

Dur (2014) asserts that

> The role of visual communication cannot be ignored in the design of data and information that we are heavily exposed to. Human mind is able to perceive the visual information transfer in a short time and in a more efficient and permanent way compared to written or verbal information transfer. (p. 40)

Dur (2014) also points out that data visualization as part of infographics allows the researcher to create a visual representation of data that can "…inform, entertain, or persuade the audience" (p. 43), grab their attention, and influence change.

As experienced by other poetic inquirers and I, all data may not be amenable to artistic interpretation. Some data, like demographic ones, are best presented in a table or graph with numbers and percentages. On the other hand, responses that involve choice making, and qualitative responses by participants offer rich opportunities to explore creatively. Most importantly, poetic inquirers must sift through data and "[s]ifting through data, whether researcher data from field texts of various kinds or participant data, is the process of intuitively sorting out words, phrases, sentences, and passages that synthesize meaning from the prose in the light of a particular research question" (Prendergast, 2009, p. 370).

That is why, I chose all responses to question nine and qualitative responses to question eleven to represent data through infographics and drawing. Question nine asked "What are some challenges you are facing in teaching students with disabilities during the pandemic? Select all that apply.

  a. Student attention/focus
  b. Student Behavior problems
  c. Difficulty communicating with students
  d. Difficulty challenging students to achieve higher.
  e. Difficulty motivating students
  f. Difficulty engaging students for longer periods.
  g. Absenteeism or poor attendance to virtual classes
  h. Poor attendance in face-to-face classes
  i. Incomplete assignments
  j. Difficulty documenting progress
  k. Difficulty communicating with parents
  l. Student health concerns related to the pandemic.
  m. Additional demands on your time
  n. Additional workload
  o. Technology problems
  p. Lack of or poor Wi-Fi connections/services
  q. Lack of time to collaborate with IEP team/colleagues
  r. Lack of time to collaborate with families
  s. Standardized testing participation issues
  t. Other."

Damaru Yati

The hourglass shape of the arrangement of data (Figure 1) is modeled after a musical technic used in classical music of India called *Damaru Yati*. According to The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Music of India (2011), *Damaru Yati* is a "[t]erm related to tempo: fast in the beginning, slow in the middle, and again fast in the end, indicating the hour-glass shape of a Damaru" (two-sided hand drum).

All 50 participants responded to this question by selecting the options "a" to "s," and some teachers typed their responses to "t. Other" option. Using content analysis methods, I sorted the data in descending order of the frequency of problems. For example, most teachers selected "student attention and focus" and "student behavior problems" as the top two concerns, so these two behaviors occupied the top rows of the graph. And as very few teachers reported concerns with standardized testing, lack of time to collaborate and poor wi-fi

connection, these response ratings occupied the bottom rows of the graph. To create the drum shape, I reorganized the data as follows:

   i.   Separated student problems from teacher problems.
  ii.   Regrouped student problems and teaching problem-based on common meanings.
 iii.   Calculated the percentages of each, combined set of responses.
  iv.   Regrouped student problems under new categories.
   v.   Organized new categories students in ascending order of responses.
  vi.   Created a few graphs of this data set on Microsoft Excel.
 vii.   Sorted new categories of student problems into two – Individual behavior and External problems.

Responses that were governed by students' behavior fell under "individual," and responses that were not in direct control of students under "external." Thus *attention, focus, absenteeism, motivation,* and *engagement* were represented by the category "individual," and "*technology,*" and *standardized testing issues* under "external." Next, the codes in the "external" category were moved to "teaching/teaching problems," as these items were more in control of the teacher than the student (see Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, for an exemplar article on content analysis methods). Finally, I created a graph from the data sorted under 'individual' category, which looked like this:

Figure 1
Student Problems
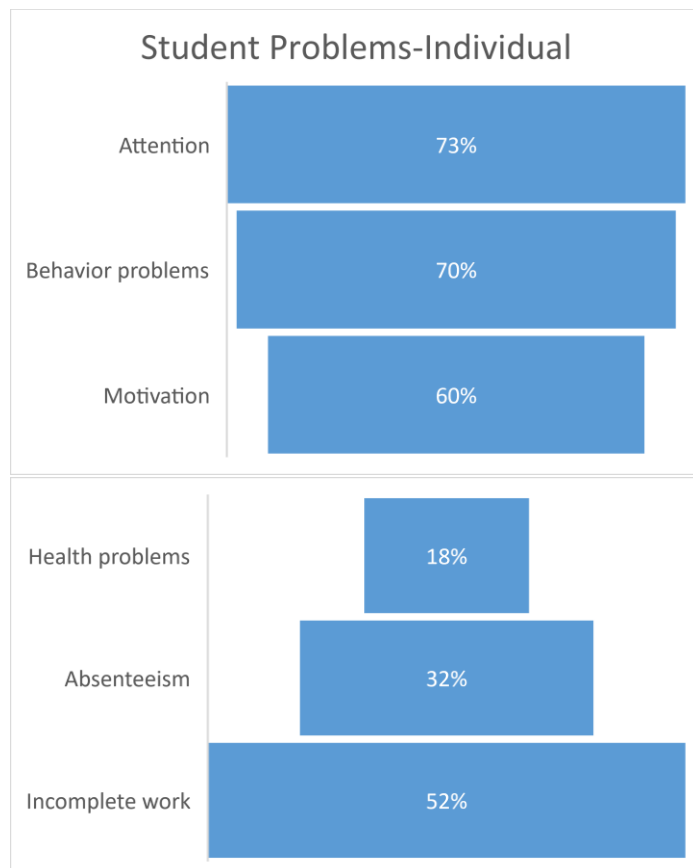
The artist in me wanted to recreate the machine-made figure. Hence, I drew a replica of the above graph with some embellishments to resemble the model of a *damaru*, as below:

Figure 2: A Damaru of Student Problems
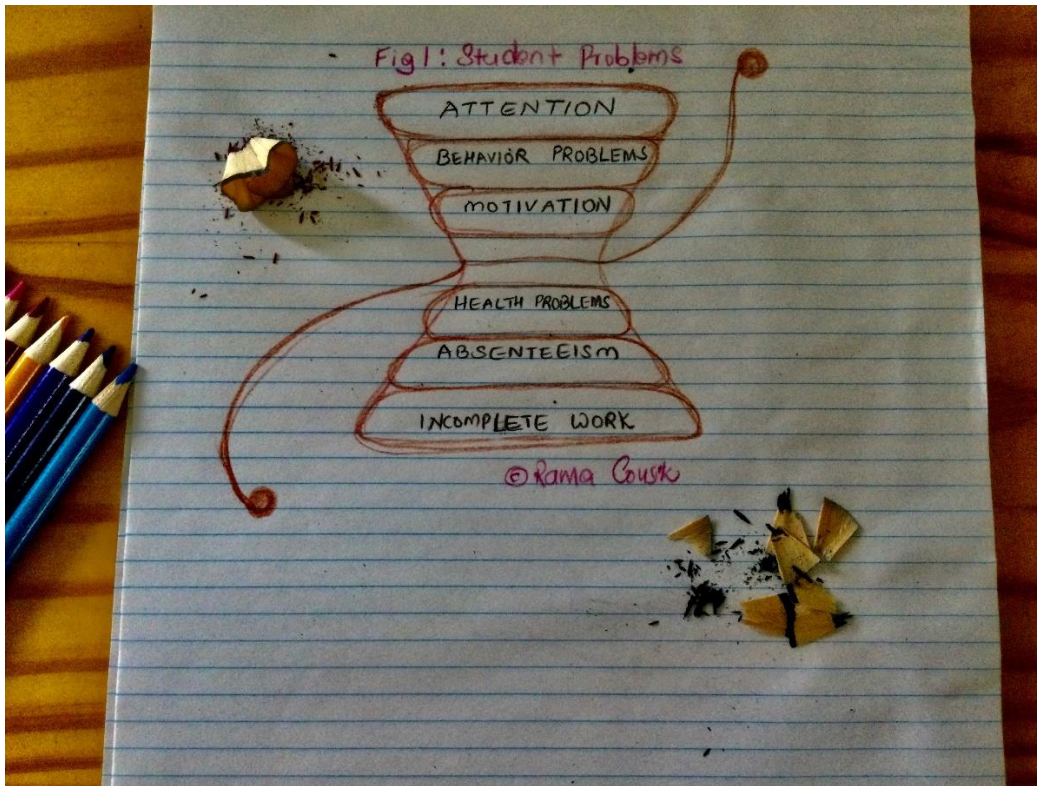
Found Poetry

The next set of responses were selected from teacher responses to question nine, 't. Other' and question eleven, which asked their recommendations for each agency involved in special education. One teacher's response seemed to sum up the issues that most participants voiced. In response to question eleven, she said:

> Putting an endless amount of new ways to attempt to bridge the gap that was created during the pandemic is exhausting teachers. New testing. New protocols. New data to collect and build lessons from. And then asking us to take care of ourselves with no additional support.

Her response seemed to indicate an unfairness in a system that thrust numerous responsibilities on teachers, without regard to their health and well-being. Two teachers asked for "increased funding to address the issues such as: learning gaps, teacher shortages, support staff shortages" and "…better pay to encourage teachers," while another teacher said:

> …the main support we need is better pay. The amount of education, expertise, and emotional energy required for this work justifies it over and over. It would alleviate nearly all of our district's staff shortages, substitute shortages, burnout in those of us still here, and every single inclination I personally have toward changing careers.

Using found poetry technics, I filtered out parts of these direct quotes that stood out when I repeatedly read the responses (Prendergast et al., 2009). I selected phrases that seemed to represent teachers' concerns and anguish to create a found poem:

[But] Don't Forget to Take Care of Yourself

New Testing!
No Extra Pay!
New Protocols!!
Staff Shortages!
No Additional Support!
New Data Collection Methods!
[But] don't forget to take care of yourself!

Say No to Standardized Testing

Some (n=9) teachers questioned the current mandate of standardized testing for students with disabilities and expressed how they were preventing students from learning:

> We already know our students are extremely behind due to the pandemic. Don't take away days from our instruction to give a test that will only frustrate the students when they don't know the answers and provides us with no data.

IEP and General Education Teacher Involvement

Teachers reiterated the importance of general education teachers' involvement in the IEP process and implementation. Recommendations for general education teachers included increased involvement, enhancing their knowledge about the IEP, training in the IEP development, deeper awareness of student progress, attendance at case conferences, flexibility of curriculum ("Establish a curriculum that is appropriate with current times"), involvement in progress monitoring, parity, mutual sharing of resources, and supporting special education teachers.

Parent Involvement in School

Teachers noted a lack of support by parents and urged parents to be more involved in their children's education. They asked parents to read to their children daily or encourage siblings to read to them, monitor children's progress, desist from blaming the teachers for their children's actions, and have "realistic expectation of teachers and their student."
In one teacher's words,

> Parents need to support teachers more as opposed to simply believing their what their child says. They need to participate in meetings and be involved in the case conferences. They need to participate in the electronic gradebook so they can stay up to date on the assignments their student has failed to turn in as well as not be surprised by a poor grade. Or to address a potential problem when they know things are being done at home but not recorded at school.

Role of Media

Teachers asked the media to portray teachers in a more positive manner (*"BE KIND!!!"*), appreciate their efforts to keep schools running during the pandemic, be informed about education policies, and avoid pitting parents and teachers against each other. One teacher said:

> Celebrate teachers for the heroes we are. It was fun at the beginning of the pandemic when parents realized how hard it was to keep their child on task after schools shut down but that quickly dissolved back into an us vs. them mentality of families vs. schools.

Another pointed out the risk of media bias and urged them, "Highlight the good that's happening in the community. Stop vilifying sides of town, neighborhoods, groups of people, etc."

Question ten asked, "What types of support does your organization provide?" About 36% of the teachers shared that their school and school district provided many types of support. Using content analysis methods, I organized them under these categories based on words and phrases that represented similar meanings: instructional support, professional development, administrative support, and accommodations. For example, teacher responses that contained the phrases, "instructional support," "facilitators to help with problem solving," "support facilitators," etc., were grouped under the category, 'instructional support;" responses that contained the phrases "professional learning meetings," "PL's," "professional learning chair of departments," etc., were grouped under the category, 'professional development,' and so on (see Table 2).

Supports Provided by the School/District (n=18)

Table 1			
Supports Provided by School District			
Instructional Support	Professional Development	Administrative Support	Accommodations
Instructional Support Facilitators to help with problem solving. Taking time to help me support students.	We have weekly professional learning meetings.	Administration is supportive with student behaviors. They also support us with difficult parents that have unrealistic expectations of their children's ability.	Standard modification and accommodations. Technology for certain students.
Support Facilitators - IEP workdays (but not enough)	PL's Professional Learning Chair of Departments		Inclusion, accommodations addressed in IEPs and 405s
We have monthly district meetings with our instructional support facilitator from the	2 hr delays on Weds. This year only a few 2 hr delays during the yr.	The office of special education as well as our	

district. We also have occasional mandatory zoom meetings for professional learning with all of the special education department and have weekly meetings with our departments or grade levels. Coaches, admin Direct Integrated Consult tech staff last year more staff Academic support and an instructional coach within the building		director, instructional support facilitators, and administrators have been wonderful for keeping in touch and asking for feedback about what we are experiencing. They have been helpful with reaching out to families and supporting us in our decisions. Last year I taught face to face, virtual, and blended all at the same time. As far a support we offer many facets of support	

No Support (n= 14)

On the contrary about 28% of the teachers, across grade levels, reported that they received minimal to no support or that the support they received was inadequate to meet the needs of students. I categorized the responses according to grade levels the teachers taught: preschool, kindergarten, elementary, middle school, and high school. More elementary and high school teachers said they had no/minimal support compared to preschool, kindergarten, and middle school teachers (see Table 3).

Table 2
No Support

Preschool	Kindergarten	Elementary	Middle School	High School
"training" for technology - does not help me. most of it is aimed for k-12 and when it is	No additional support provided compared to prior to pandemic. [Kindergarten]	2 hour delays for students once a month for teacher work time. BUT, most of these mornings have been filled up with	My school and district do the best they can, but we have such a huge teacher and support staff shortage, they	Unfortunately the district does not provide any additional time to work with students without having to leave one of our co-

taught it goes too fast. Group meetings with preschool and sped directors and per zoom and online materials to share with parents." [Preschool]		professional learning. Because of these PLs, it has not been very helpful to my workload in the classroom. [Elementary] Piling on more work in the form of committees to try and simplify our work but actually it ends up adding more work on to the teachers/staff. [Kindergarten, Elementary] Not much to any. [Elementary] Very little. Expectations are still the same and getting higher with no understanding or consideration of the time and the needs of our students during this time. [Elementary]	can't provide much support. [Middle School] None. [Middle School]	taught classes. This leaves the class we are supposed to be teaching without two teachers in the classroom. Our prep time is taken up with calling parents and working on IEP's. There are no supports. [High School] I feel like my school does not support our SPED teachers let alone our SPED students. They wait until the last minute to inform us of important information needed for our SPED students on our caseload. Academics classes that need additional support are left without. Important direct service classes that students need are not being provided. [High School] bare minimum. [High School] The only support is when we are provided a specific number of days to work on IEP's and case conferences without being in the classrooms. This is based on the total number of students

				on YOUR caseload. So if you are around 21 to 25 you get 3 days. 15 to 20 you get 2 days. 26 to 30 you get 4 days. This time requires you to still be in the building, but not working on anything other than your IEP's and meetings without coteaching [High School]

One teacher shared that, although the district provided additional training, it was not specific to her needs, viz behavior management of high school students. They stated that students took undue advantage of the school's referral system to escape work and were at risk for failure. In her words,

> In terms of special education and being a first year teacher, the district has provided many training dates to go over things. However, it is overwhelming to learn unless I am directly applying the information to a student on my caseload (e.g., move-in procedures without having a move-in conference). As far as student behavior and willingness to learn... I'm lost. High school teachers are receiving an insane amount of disrespect from students (and parents). We have a referral system at my school, but most times students don't mind getting referrals because it gets them "free days off of school" (aka suspension). But what they fail to realize is that suspensions and quarantine are doing nothing but ensuring their failure because they disregard school while they are gone despite teachers' efforts.

While another teacher also appreciated the availability and help of instructional coaches, she said teachers would rather get financial incentives such as a pay raise, which might also reduce the extent of teacher burn-out in the district. She said,

> We have an instructional technology support person who comes to our building once every couple of weeks. She's helpful. We also have instructional support facilitators (ISFs) who are always available by email or phone. They're good, too. Frankly, though, the main support we need is better pay. The amount of education, expertise, and emotional energy required for this work justifies it over and over. It would alleviate nearly all of our district's staff shortages, substitute shortages, burnout in those of us still here, and every single inclination I personally have toward changing careers.

Discussion

Special education teachers from one K-12 school district in a Midwestern city reported that there were many challenges in teaching students with disabilities due to the COVID-19

pandemic. The chaos that the pandemic created for the world's student-teacher population in general, and specifically special education teachers and students, is reflected in their comments. Fifty-one teachers out of a total of 271 returned the survey and fifty were complete. Analysis of responses indicated several problems faced by teachers – student attention, focus and motivation, minimal to moderate support from the school district, inadequate family involvement, new and confusing mandates by the district and state, and the need for more involvement by general education teachers in special education.

Implications for Arts-Based Inquiry

Arts based inquiry, including poetic inquiry, allows researchers to examine pieces of data of particular interest that stand out compellingly on their inquiry journey. Researchers can take these pieces that stand out to them at once or when they repeatedly read data, and present and share them in evocative ways, using visualization, poetry, drawing, and other creative media (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Leavy, 2017). I analyzed questions nine and eleven using arts-based research methods – infographic (CACM Staff, 2014), found poetry (Prendergast et al., 2009), and drawing, based on Indian music system. The arts-based research methods I used here allowed me to gaze more deeply at the data, think of creative arts methods that were best suited for crystallizing and representing findings, and provoke the readers to think further/of the implications for practice. It is evident that recent technology and conventional arts-methods can be juxtaposed effectively to represent data in a compelling manner, as evident in Figure 1 and a hand-drawn representation of the same. Teachers listed student attention and focus, motivation, problem behaviors, and lack of engagement as top concerns. As the *Damaru's* string strikes from the two heads of the drum to produce sound, and the bigger ends signify higher prevalence of problems, a teacher could attempt to reduce the size of the drum gradually, i.e., prioritize the problems that are more prevalent.

As shown in the found poem on the other hand, teachers were burdened with additional workload with none to minimal incentives in the face of technology problems, staff shortages, and regulations. Although some teachers were fortunate to get the right support from administrators and colleagues, many were not.

Implications for Education

From this survey, it is evident teachers were not immune to the problems faced by the rest of the world; rather, special education teachers were burdened with additional issues which were more intense, comparable to those faced by healthcare workers such as nurses. For example, Galanis et al. (2021) found some contributing factors for burnout among nurses included "…inadequate and insufficient material and human resources, increased workload and lower level of specialized training regarding (p. 3286)." Similarly, as reported in other studies (e.g., Burleigh et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2022; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Yulianti & Mukminin, 2021), teachers were asked to provide high quality instruction to students with disabilities with limited resources and minimal or no training in remote instruction and use of technology. They had the additional responsibilities of modifying instruction from face to face to online mode, learning skills on the job, and using whatever limited resources they had on hand. Some teachers were fortunate to have additional funding and resources, but many said the support was inadequate. More importantly, it is critical to note that the problems induced by the pandemic continue to linger, and teachers, students, and families require additional supports to adjust to the new normal. Such adjustments are riddled with challenges, as many students with behavior disorders and ASD find transition challenging in general and are highly likely to continue to face difficulties with the rapid changes in mode of learning and learning

environment necessitated by the pandemic (Hurwitz et al., 2022). Hence, as De Lapp (2022) recommends in a blog published by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), teachers must receive training in how to cope with student behavior problems induced by crisis or traumatic events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although schools have resumed face to face teaching, the deleterious effects of the pandemic are lingering, almost doubling the risk of teacher attrition (Fullard, 2021). And pandemic or no pandemic, teachers require adequate administrative support, financial incentives (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), and public recognition for their work, to reduce burnout. This concurs with the recommendations made by the participants in this study including, better pay for teachers and other supports to prevent burnout, increasing general education teacher involvement in the IEP and instruction, revamping the standardized testing mandate for children with disabilities, increased parent involvement in education, and acknowledgement and appreciation of teachers by the media.

The media (both mass media such as newspaper and television and social media) play a powerful role in raising awareness about pandemic's effect on education because people generally "trust" media reports and "…individual trust in the media plays a significant role in shaping citizen belief and behavior" (Han et al., 2022). According to (Deuze, 2020),

> Mass media are not the only possible basis for an effective communication network that extends throughout a society. Alternative (non-mass-media) technologies…exist…but these usually lack the society-wide social elements and public roles which media and mass communication has. This is why we care so much what is said and presented in the media, who gets to be seen and heard in the press, what characters, storylines and messages are embedded in our games and entertainment. Media matter. (pp. 6-7)

Hence, the special education teachers in this study rightly asked the media to "*BE KIND…*", "*Celebrate teachers for the heroes we are,*" be informed about educational policies, and minimize biases while reporting about children in marginalized communities and neighborhoods.

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Author Note

Dr. Rama Cousik is an associate professor in Special Education at Purdue University, Fort Wayne. Rama received her Ph. D from Indiana University Bloomington in 2011. She teaches courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels on inclusion, UDL strategies, autism, and collaboration. She also supervises graduate students on their thesis and research projects. Rama is a qualitative researcher, and her publications showcase use of poetic inquiry and cultural interpretations of disability. Please direct correspondence to cousikr@pfw.edu.

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