

Stress and Anxiety during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Experiences of Special Needs and Learning Support Educators



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that contributed to stress and anxiety in special needs and learning support educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study used qualitative methodology, incorporating semi-structured interviews, a qualitative questionnaire, and a focus group discussion for data collection. Ten special education and learning support teachers from special schools, and full-service schools in the Gauteng province, in South Africa were sampled for the study. Using interpretive phenomenology to analyse the data gathered for this study, it was discovered that special needs and learning support educators experienced stress and anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic because of (a) an increase in workload; (b) adapting traditional face-to-face methods of teaching to online education; (c) teacher and parent collaboration, and (d) implementing COVID-19 regulations in a special needs classroom. The study proposes several recommendations, including the enhancement of teacher preparation for online pedagogical methods, the provision of psychological support services, the improvement of parental communication channels, and the promotion of curricular flexibility. Emphasis is placed on appropriate resource allocation, professional development workshops, and the implementation of online counseling services to identify challenges. This study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the coping mechanisms employed by SETs and LSEs during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it underscores the need for comprehensive support systems and adequate resource provision to enable educators to effectively perform their roles under adverse circumstances.

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INTRODUCTION

Africa, which is a vulnerable continent due to poverty, has a high prevalence of infectious diseases, cases of inadequate healthcare systems, and winter flu. The COVID-19 pandemic has been an eye-opening experience on the state of healthcare in Africa. In the past, similar health-related issues like malaria, HIV/AIDS, and Ebola have previously affected Africa which ravaged many countries leading to countless deaths. Africa showed a certain degree of readiness to address the challenges that resulted from COVID-19. Furthermore, individuals in Africa were better equipped to cope with, and work around the virus

because of their prior experiences with viruses of this kind.¹ After COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization, all countries including South Africa had to take immediate action to stop the spread of the virus.

On March 23, 2020, the President of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa announced a 21-day statewide lockdown with effect from March 26.² This first 21-day period, however, was prolonged to eight weeks, during which time public meetings, attendance at school, and non-essential business activity (except for the sale of food and medication) were rigorously forbidden. It was critical to restrict physical contact between individuals during the COVID-19 outbreak to stop the virus's transmission. The closing of schools around the world was one of the biggest measures used to stop the virus's spread.³ Thus, efforts related to in-person instruction were put on hold indefinitely.⁴ Throughout the world, schools were forced to switch to online instruction, which proved to be a great challenge for many schools.⁵

The close connections between children of school age at schools led to the identification of schools as one of the primary dangers contributing to the virus's transmission.⁶ It was believed that closing schools would be a good approach to stop the spread of the virus.⁷ When the COVID-19 virus was originally discovered in some parts of China, on February 16, 2020, school closures were initially implemented. When the virus spread, moreover, by March 2020, 46 more countries closed their schools completely or partially.

The primary, secondary, and university education systems were under strain because of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ Manpreet reported that certain schools' use of online teaching methodologies exposed the gaps and injustices in the global education system.⁹ These disparities demonstrated that the virus also decreased the chances for vulnerable children, youth, and adults to receive education. Individuals of every nationality, income bracket, gender, or educational attainment have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ However, the impact and effects of the pandemic have not been the same, resulting in vulnerable populations being mostly affected by the pandemic.¹¹

Special needs educators are among a list of professionals who have not been prioritized, and they were recognized as one of the groups that were prone to experiencing stress and burnout before the COVID-19 outbreak. Some scholars state that the nature of the work that special needs educators do, which involves caring for learners with special needs, causes special needs educators to undergo an unmanageable amount of stress.¹² Teacher stress is a misalliance between the demands and obligations placed on educators and their capacity to meet those demands. Being a teacher is demanding work, and it is common for educators to feel depressed, anxious, and frustrated.¹³ However, it has historically been

¹ EdTech Hub, "The Effect of COVID-19 on Education in Africa and Its Implications for the Use of Technology," 2020.

² Nic Spaul and Servaas Van der Berg, "Counting the Cost: COVID-19 School Closures in South Africa and Its Impact on Children," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (December 7, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.924>.

³ Ronghuai H Huang et al., "Handbook on Facilitating Flexible Learning during Educational Disruption: The Chinese Experience in Maintaining Undisrupted Learning in COVID-19 Outbreak," *Beijing: Smart Learning Institute of Beijing Normal University* 46 (2020).

⁴ Jake Lewis, Susan Schneegans, and Tiffany Straza, *UNESCO Science Report: The Race against Time for Smarter Development*, vol. 2021 (Unesco Publishing, 2021).

⁵ Guo-Hui Xie, "Understanding People with Disabilities within the Biblical Concepts of Imago Dei and Imitatio Christi," *World Wide Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development* 6, no. 10 (2020).

⁶ Zachary Parolin, "Unemployment and Child Health during COVID-19 in the USA," *The Lancet Public Health* 5, no. 10 (2020): e521–22.

⁷ Simon Cauchemez et al., "School Closures during the 2009 Influenza Pandemic: National and Local Experiences," *BMC Infectious Diseases* 14 (2014): 1–11; Nilimesh Halder, Joel K Kelso, and George J Milne, "Developing Guidelines for School Closure Interventions to Be Used during a Future Influenza Pandemic," *BMC Infectious Diseases* 10, no. 1 (December 27, 2010): 221, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2334-10-221>.

⁸ A. Schleicher, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Insights from Education at a Glance," 2020, www.oecd.org/education/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-insightseducation-at-a-glance-2020.pdf.

⁹ Wahab Ali and Manpreet Kaur, "Mediating Educational Challenges amidst Covid-19 Pandemic," *Asia Pac. J. Contemp. Educ. Commun. Technol* 6, no. 2 (2020): 40–57.

¹⁰ United Nations, *World Population Ageing 2019: Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/430)*, 2020.

¹¹ J. P. Azavedo et al., "Learning Losses Due to COVID19 Could Add up to \$10 Trillion," 2020, <https://www.blogs.worldbank.org/education/learning-losses-due-covid19-could-add10-trillion#>; Schleicher, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Insights from Education at a Glance."

¹² John A Kaufhold, Velma G Alvarez, and Mitylene Arnold, "Lack of School Supplies, Materials and Resources as an Elementary Cause of Frustration and Burnout in South Texas Special Education Teachers," *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 33, no. 3 (2006): 159–62; P. E. Horne, and V. Timmons, Making it work: Teachers' perspectives on inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13(3), (2009); 273–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110701433964>; Loraine McKay, "Beginning Teachers and Inclusive Education: Frustrations, Dilemmas and Growth," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 20, no. 4 (2016): 383–96.

¹³ C. Kyriacou, "Teacher stress: Directions for future research." *Educational Review*, 53, (2001). 27-35.

indicated that the main source of stress for educators is the workload they are subjected to.¹⁴ Educators' emotional well-being impacts their work performance and can prevent them from teaching efficiently.¹⁵ Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the factors that contributed to stress and anxiety with a focus on special needs and learning support educators in Gauteng province, South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also seeks to provide recommendations on how these educators can better navigate through stress and anxiety-inducing experiences in the future.

The following research question underlies the research: What were the causes of stress and anxiety experienced by special needs, and learning support educators during the COVID-19 pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Increased teacher workload during the Covid-19 pandemic

In their daily work, educators must deal with a variety of obstacles, including managing the classroom, meeting the needs of diverse learners, and working under time restrictions, and in the context of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these conditions.¹⁶ A great burden was placed on special needs and learning support educators due to the Covid-19 pandemic. These educators had to adapt to teaching and learning through online platforms; they had to balance their professional and personal obligations, and because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they began to worry about both the stability of their jobs and their future.¹⁷ Due to the increased workload during the pandemic, educators have also reported experiencing worry, despair, and irregular sleep patterns. The stress of teaching and the increasing use of technology in the classroom influence educators to feel this way.¹⁸

Adapting traditional teaching methods of teaching for online education during the Covid-19 pandemic

Careful content selection and organization are necessary for content preparation and delivery, to ensure that each learner's needs are met.¹⁹ When creating lesson plans, educators need to consider the emotive, cognitive, and psychomotor skills of their learners. Teachers can control the learning environment when they are teaching in person, but this is not always the case when instructing through an online platform.²⁰

Although they had previous opportunities to introduce and discuss various concepts and investigate and elaborate on a construct in face-to-face instruction prior to lockdown, teachers of learners with special education needs rarely can do so in online instruction.²¹ Special education strategies are developed to improve the academic performance of the learner. These methods support the development of rapport and relationships, the use of learning tools, the ongoing evaluation of students' comprehension levels, measurement, and modification of disruptive behaviors.

The difficulty faced by special-needs educators was their inability to offer learners with disabilities the special education services they needed. It was even more difficult to accomplish this when there were

¹⁴ Kirsten A Marko, *Hearing the Unheard Voices: An in-Depth Look at Teacher Mental Health and Wellness* (The University of Western Ontario (Canada), 2015).

¹⁵ Abdulrahman Essa Al Lily et al., "Distance Education as a Response to Pandemics: Coronavirus and Arab Culture," *Technology in Society* 63 (November 2020): 101317, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2020.101317>; Jantine L. Spilt, Helma M. Y. Koomen, and Jochem T. Thijs, "Teacher Wellbeing: The Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships," *Educational Psychology Review* 23, no. 4 (December 12, 2011): 457-77, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-011-9170-y>.

¹⁶ Tammy Polok, Balvinder Samra, and Tammy Stubbings, "Stressors and Well-Being of Educators," 2020.

¹⁷ Min-Pei Lin, "Prevalence of Internet Addiction during the COVID-19 Outbreak and Its Risk Factors among Junior High School Students in Taiwan," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 22 (November 18, 2020): 8547, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17228547>; D. Ahorsu, et al., "The Fear of COVID-19 Scale: Development and Initial Validation." *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 20(10), (2020) <https://www.doi.org/1007/s11469-020-00270-8>.

¹⁸ J. Mattern, and J. Bauer, "Does teachers' cognitive self-regulation increase their occupational well-being? The structure and role of self-regulation in the teaching context." *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 43, (2014); 58-68 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.05.004>; A. Garrick, et al., Non-Work Time Activities Predicting Teachers' Work-Related Fatigue and Engagement: An Effort-Recovery Approach. *Australian Psychologist*, 53(3), (2018); 243-252. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1111/ap.12290>

¹⁹ O T Adigun et al., "COVID-19 and Learners with Disabilities: Towards Divergent Praxis in Teacher Preparation for Equity and Epistemic Justice," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 36, no. 4 (2022): 225-42.

²⁰ Adigun et al., "COVID-19 and Learners with Disabilities: Towards Divergent Praxis in Teacher Preparation for Equity and Epistemic Justice."

²¹ Reynol Junco, "ISpy: Seeing What Students Really Do Online," *Learning, Media and Technology* 39, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 75-89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2013.771782>; Thuthukile Jita, "Exploring Pre-Service Teachers' Opportunities to Learn to Teach Science with ICTs during Teaching Practice," *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, no. 71 (2018): 73-90.

learners with numerous or severe disabilities.²² An online learning schedule presents difficulties for many learners with disabilities since they require a more structured learning environment in which they can engage with peers and teachers.²³

Teacher and parent collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic

According to Turnbull, et.al, the active participation of parents in the teaching and learning of their child, facilitates the learning outcomes of the child.²⁴ During online learning, parents transformed themselves into educators, and this required collaboration and sharing between educators and parents. Collaboration between educators and parents was crucial to ensure that the child continued to learn during the COVID-19 pandemic, as teaching and learning were conducted from a distance.²⁵ While parents play a crucial role in their child's development, it could have been difficult to engage in this process during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this unprecedented time, parents were overly preoccupied with their jobs and household responsibilities, which may have led to them not paying enough attention to their children's education.²⁶ In addition, they were overburdened by the lockdown, and the possibility of losing their jobs and income, which would result in them not being able to provide for their child's needs, and their educational necessities.²⁷

Parents must collaborate with teachers and learners while using distance education.²⁸ Since the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has become more common, and it is because of this that special needs educators have to depend on parents and other caregivers to help their children learn.²⁹ Thus, to ensure that learning was taking place, parents and educators needed to work together. However, this was a challenge because parents had never received training in behavioral and learning tactics. This presented a problem for special needs educators who had to train parents in educational practices to use while teaching their children at home.

The implementation of Covid-19 regulations in a special needs classroom

Regulations were implemented specifically to stop the spread of the coronavirus during the Covid-19 pandemic. Social distancing is one of the numerous limitations that was enforced to curb the spread of the virus. Social distancing, according to Abel and McQueen and Aminnejad and Alikhani, is keeping a physical distance from other individuals.³⁰ The education team, which is made up of instructors, students, principals, and other members of the teaching and learning staff, within the school premises, had to keep their social distance from one another to stop the Coronavirus from spreading.³¹

Wearing a facemask was another COVID-19 rule that was implemented, and had to be adhered to, to stop the virus from spreading. Spitzer claims that wearing a facemask made it easy to control the spread

²² Clinton Smith, "Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching Students with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education* 5, no. 1 (2020): 167–73.

²³ Smith, "Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching Students with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic."

²⁴ Ann Turnbull et al., *Families, Professionals, and Exceptionality: Positive Outcomes through Partnerships and Trust* (Pearson, 2015).

²⁵ Nasir Mustafa, "Impact of the 2019–20 Coronavirus Pandemic on Education," *International Journal of Health Preferences Research* 4, no. 1 (2020): 25–30; Karen L. Kritzer and Chad E. Smith, "Educating Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students During COVID-19: What Parents Need to Know," *The Hearing Journal* 73, no. 8 (August 2020): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.HJ.0000695836.90893.20>.

²⁶ R. Cai and Q. Wang, Six-Step Online Teaching Method Based on Protocol-Guided Learning during the COVID-19 Epidemic: A Case Study of the First Middle School Teaching Practice in Changyuan City, Henan Province, China (2020) <http://www.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3555526>

²⁷ Gözde Akoğlu and Bedriye Tuğba Karaşlan, "COVID-19 ve İzolasyon Sürecinin Çocuklar Üzerindeki Olası Psikososyal Etkileri," *İzmir Katip Çelebi Üniversitesi Sağlık Bilimleri Fakültesi Dergisi* 5, no. 2 (2020): 99–103; Eileen K. Fry-Bowers, "Children Are at Risk from COVID-19," *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 53 (July 2020): A10–12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedn.2020.04.026>.

²⁸ Rasmitadila Rasmitadila et al., "The Perceptions of Primary School Teachers of Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Period," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2020): 90–109.

²⁹ Rachel K. Schuck and Rachel Lambert, "'Am I Doing Enough?' Special Educators' Experiences with Emergency Remote Teaching in Spring 2020," *Education Sciences* 10, no. 11 (November 5, 2020): 320, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10110320>.

³⁰ Thomas Abel and David McQueen, "The COVID-19 Pandemic Calls for Spatial Distancing and Social Closeness: Not for Social Distancing!," *International Journal of Public Health* (Springer, 2020); Reza Aminnejad and Rosa Alikhani, "Physical Distancing or Social Distancing: That Is the Question," *Canadian Journal of Anesthesia/Canadian Journal d'anesthésie* 67, no. 10 (October 11, 2020): 1457–58, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12630-020-01697-2>.

³¹ I. Rotnisky, R. Yavich and N. Davi'ovich, "The Impact of the Pandemic on Teachers' Attitudes toward Online Teaching," *International Journal of Higher Education*, 11(5), (2022); 1- 21.

of the Coronavirus and that facemask policies were easy to adopt in schools.³² However, wearing a face mask had some drawbacks, according to Esposito, Cotugno, and Principi.³³ The drawback could be identified in young learners with respiratory conditions, and for those learners who have unique educational needs, wearing a facemask was a challenge. Facemasks can prevent learners and teachers from expressing their emotions, including smiling, by hiding a large area of the wearer's face and interfering with spoken and nonverbal communication. The relationship between teachers and students may be impacted by this.³⁴

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3C Model Of Teacher Stress

In this study, a stress questionnaire was used as a data collection tool, leading to the incorporation of Coping-Competence-Context Theory (also known as the 3C Model of Teacher Stress) into the theoretical framework. This model integrates three key theories:

1. Transactional Theory³⁵
2. Stress Mindset Theory³⁶
3. Prosocial Classroom Model³⁷

The combination of these theories provides a comprehensive framework for understanding teacher stress and coping mechanisms. The 3C Theory of Teacher Stress, developed by Herman, Reincke and Eddy, identifies three interconnected pathways leading to teacher stress: (1) Coping, (2) Competence, and (3) Context. Together, these elements form a framework that explains the various factors contributing to teacher stress.³⁸

The study integrated this theory based on prior research highlighting the inherently stressful nature of the teaching profession, with stress levels being high even before the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁹ The study aimed to explore and quantify the stress experienced by educators during the pandemic, examine the effects of this stress, and assess the coping strategies used by teachers to manage it.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: Single Exploratory Case Study

The study employed a single, exploratory case study design, which was chosen for its ability to deeply examine complex factors and interactions within a specific context. This approach allowed for a rich, detailed understanding of the phenomenon being studied. As Schurink and Auriacombe suggest, case studies enable the examination of complex social phenomena in their natural settings, providing a comprehensive exploration of the contextual factors that influence the subject.⁴⁰ The researcher chose a single, exploratory case study design for two key reasons:

³² R. Mupedziswa, M. Rankopo, and L. K. Mwansa, "Ubuntu as a Pan African Philosophical Framework for Social Work in Africa," in *Social Work Practice in Africa: Indigenous and Innovative Approaches*, ed. J.M. Twikirize and H. Spitzer (Kampala: Fountain Publisher, 2019), 21–38.

³³ Susanna Esposito, Nicola Cotugno, and Nicola Principi, "Comprehensive and Safe School Strategy during COVID-19 Pandemic," *Italian Journal of Pediatrics* 47 (2021): 1–4.

³⁴ Diego Vergara et al., "Impact of Using Facemasks on Literacy Learning: The Perception of Early Childhood Education Teachers," *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education* 12, no. 6 (June 17, 2022): 639–54, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe12060048>; M. Spitzer, "Masked education? The benefits and burdens of wearing face masks in schools during the current Corona pandemic," *Trends Neuroscience Education*, 20, (2021); 100138. <https://www.doi.org/10.1016/j.tine.2020.100138>

³⁵ R. S. Lazarus and S. Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*. (Springer, 1984).

³⁶ Alia J. Crum, Peter Salovey, and Shawn Achor, "Rethinking Stress: The Role of Mindsets in Determining the Stress Response.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 104, no. 4 (April 2013): 716–33, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031201>.

³⁷ Patricia A. Jennings and Mark T. Greenberg, "The Prosocial Classroom: Teacher Social and Emotional Competence in Relation to Student and Classroom Outcomes," *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 491–525, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693>.

³⁸ K. C. Herman, W. M. Reincke, C. L. Eddy, "Advances in understanding and intervening in teacher stress and coping: The Coping-Competence-Context Theory." *Journal of School Psychology*, 78, (2020); 69-74.

³⁹ Marko, *Hearing the Unheard Voices: An in-Depth Look at Teacher Mental Health and Wellness*.

⁴⁰ E. Schurink and C. Auriacombe, "Theory Development: Enhancing the Quality of the Case Study as Research Strategy in Qualitative Research," 2010, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322926450_THEORY_DEVELOPMENT_ENHANCING_THE_QUALITY_OF_THE_CASE_STUDY_AS_RESEARCH_STRATEGY_IN_QUALITATIVE_RESEARCH.

1. Unique Phenomenon: The study focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented global event that provided a distinctive context for the investigation.
2. Previously Inaccessible: The selection of a single case study design was further justified by the previously inaccessible nature of the phenomenon for researchers.⁴¹

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm.⁴² Data collection methods consisted of semi-structured interviews, a qualitative questionnaire, and a focus group discussion. The questionnaire, consisting of 65 semi-structured items, was administered both in-person and electronically. Focus groups were used to extend the interview process and facilitate group discussions.⁴³ Data analysis was conducted using interpretive phenomenology from an inductive perspective. This approach enabled the exploration of factors contributing to participants' stress and anxiety, aiming to understand these experiences from their perspectives.⁴⁴

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, this study adhered to rigorous ethical protocols, obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of the Education Faculty at the University of Pretoria (ethical clearance number EDU196/21). Other ethical considerations that the researcher adhered to when conducting this study were (a) **Ensuring informed consent**: The researcher ensured informed consent by explaining the purpose, scope, and procedures of the study to potential participants.⁴⁵ (b) **Right to withdraw from the study**: Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, even after signing the informed consent form.⁴⁶ (c) **Anonymity and confidentiality** were ensured by the researcher through (a) masking the individual names of the participants (b) assigning pseudonyms to the participants, as well as the research sites, and (c) withholding descriptions that would lead to the participants and their research site being identifiable.⁴⁷ Lastly, the researcher also ensured that the participants in this study would not be exposed to any **harm or danger** as a result of their participation in this study.⁴⁸

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Four themes were identified in answering the research question and are presented below:

Theme 1: Increased teacher workload

P2 stated that she experienced a heavy workload during the pandemic, *“Working at school while in lockdown and having to prepare the classes for the return of the learners was a huge endeavour for all staff members. Making sure that the learners were all safe and protected during the pandemic always meant more consideration. We also had to make sure that the classrooms were safe for the learners to use each day. This meant that we had extra work throughout and after each day. It was quite tiring”*.

Whereas P3 stated *“The workload that I was exposed to during the Covid-19 pandemic was bad, and now there are learning gaps in the knowledge that the learners have. When we got back to school, our school*

⁴¹ P. Ozcan, S. Han, and M. E. Graebner, “Single Cases. The What, Why, and How,” in *The Routledge Companion to Qualitative Research in Organization Studies*, ed. R. Mir and S. Jain (Routledge, 2017).

⁴² C. Daymon and I. Holloway, *Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2011); Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, “Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research,” 2008; M. Haradhan, “Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects,” 2018, https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/85654/1/MPRA_paper_85654.pdf.

⁴³ J. W. Collins and N. P. O'Brien, *The Greenwood Dictionary of Education* (Greenwood Press, 2003); Manju Gundumogula, “Importance of Focus Groups in Qualitative Research,” *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies* 8, no. 11 (November 30, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24940/theijhss/2020/v8/i11/HS2011-082>.

⁴⁴ J. A. Smith and M. Osborn, “Pain as an assault on the self: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the psychological impact of chronic benign low back pain.” *Psychology & Health*, 22(5), (2007); 517-534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14768320600941756>

⁴⁵ American Psychological Association (APA), “Ethical Principles of Psychologist and Code of Conduct,” 2017, <https://www.apa.org/ethics/code>.

⁴⁶ J.K. Maree and A. Di Fabio, *Complete Your Thesis or Dissertation Successfully. Practical Guidelines* (Juta and Company Ltd., 2012).

⁴⁷ Siti Roshaidai Mohd Arifin, “Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Study,” *International Journal of Care Scholars* 1, no.2(2018): 30–33.

⁴⁸ E. R. Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research*, 3rd ed. (Thomson/Wadsworth, 2005); H. Strydom, Ethical aspects of research in the social sciences and human service professions. In A. S. De Vos., H. Strydom., C. B., Fouché & C. S. L. Delpont. (Eds.), *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Science and Human Service Professions* (4th ed, pp. 113-130). (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 2011).

used the alternate days method. We had to alternate because our classes are always overcrowded. A class accommodates 42 learners and during COVID-19 that class was split into two. So, they alternated with their school attendance. However, in this alternating method, teachers were getting confused because they had to teach one thing in two days, to two separate groups of learners.”

P5 indicated that *“It was overwhelming because we were expected to finish the curriculum as stated by the department at a set time. It also made me feel inadequate because at some point I felt like I didn’t know what I was doing. I think that the pandemic put us at a disadvantage where we were behind with our workload. Certain things that we were supposed to teach our learners were not taught during the pandemic so, a lot of our learners progressed to other grades with missing knowledge.”*

Theme 2: Adapting traditional teaching methods for online education during the Covid-19 pandemic

P3 indicated, *“We were not trained to do online teaching due to the lack of ICT equipment. We had no means to teach online. Given this opportunity, it would have been welcomed, and it would have also been an exciting challenge for both the teachers and learners. Given the opportunity, I think that the learners would have done better when learning digitally, and with appropriate learning programmes.”*

P6 also supported the sentiments shared by the other participants when it comes to online learning. She stated, *“We did not teach online. We only did paper-based work, and activity ideas were sent to parents. We also just had to work on adjusting the curriculum.”*

P7 also supported the experiences of the participants when she indicated *“We did not do any online teaching. This would have been completely fruitless with the level of functioning of our learners (LSPID). Instead, we made some simple videos of our well-known songs or some activities (more for the benefit of the parents, who then had to do the activities with the learners.”*

Lastly, P8 stated *“I work in an LSEN government school where online learning was not accessible to all learners as they live in impoverished households. I would also get many learners sending me WhatsApps at all hours because we did WhatsApp teaching”. Learners at our school use specialised devices at school, and they don’t have these at home. This created a challenge when we were trying to teach learners while they were at home.”*

Theme 3: Teacher and parent collaboration during the Covid-19 pandemic

P1: *I experienced challenges with working with the parents of my learners during the pandemic. This made my job very demanding because parents needed to follow the COVID-19 rules, but they either did not or they refused to”*

P3 had no communication with the parents of her learners. She stated, *“There was no interaction between us and the parents of our learners since we are not digitally savvy at the school. Even prior to the pandemic, our school had a huge challenge of absent parental involvement in their kids’ learning. Covid-19 further exposed this challenge. There was a lack of parental involvement and parents were scared to avail themselves to come pick up the learning packages. I would say that they were literally hiding away and had lost hope generally. I could not get hold of them.”*

Theme 4: The implementation of COVID-19 regulations in a special needs classroom

P1 stated, *“Maintaining COVID-19 regulations in the classroom was extremely demanding due to our learners being highly sensory. So, the masks were eaten, and vizers scratched. We couldn’t wear masks to teach our learners. They HAVE to see facial expressions.”*

P4 indicated, *“Most learners did not want to wear a mask all the time. They did not want to sanitize all the time, and they did not want to keep to the social distancing rule. Some even told us that the only time they use masks is when they are at school.”*

P6 indicated, “Teaching SID (Severely Intellectually Disabled) learners new routines was a huge challenge. Getting a learner with ASD to wear a mask and not take it off was a huge challenge! The learners did not always understand the social distancing rules. The learners struggled to keep the mask on, and this hindered some aspects of communication in the classroom as I had to get their attention before speaking.”

P7 shared similar sentiments when she indicated, “It was impossible, unfortunately. All the learners in my class had autistic features and they simply tore off the masks the moment they entered the classroom. Sanitizing hands was not sufficient at all – learners were drooling and touching surfaces with contaminated hands all the time or putting toys in their mouths and then handing the toys to others right after that. Food bits would fall to the floor - etc. So, after a while, we just gave up, did what we could and accepted the rest”.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Workload experienced by special education and learning support educators during the Covid-19 pandemic

The participants of this study reported that the COVID-19 epidemic increased their workload. The workload that the participants experienced went beyond lesson planning; it also included physically preparing the classrooms where the learners would be in, to have them ready for when the learners returned to the classroom. As a result, the teachers had to make sure that the classrooms were tidy and safe for the learners to return to for in-person classes. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants had to put in extra time to arrange classes, interact with parents, and make sure that instruction would continue. For the participants, this required a lot of time and frequently required them to put in extra hours to complete these tasks.⁴⁹ Education professionals' workloads changed as a direct result of the COVID-19 epidemic. Teachers experienced stress due to these adjustments. The data gathered indicates that the participants of this study had a demanding workload during the COVID-19 outbreak, and the workload to which teachers were exposed had a direct impact on the stress that they experienced.⁵⁰

Teacher and parent collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic

The data collected in this study indicates that the participants in this study were challenged when they had to work with the parents of their learners. According to the data gathered, the participants did not have parents who were willing to collaborate with them to ensure that teaching and learning continued to take place, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Not being able to work with the parents of their learners resulted in the participants of this study experiencing challenges when trying to ensure that the learners were still learning even when they were learning from home. According to Sanders and Sheldon, schools succeed when there is a good rapport among the community, educators, and parents of the learners.⁵¹ Academic performance is said to improve for learners who are in a supportive family environment. Parents should always be involved in their school-age children's academic lives, and the COVID-19 epidemic was no exception. Parents and the school are crucial to a child's growth and education.⁵² A child will learn and experience school better when there is a partnership between a school and the parents of the learner.⁵³

For learners to receive integrated support, schools and parents must establish a relationship that fosters reciprocal responsibility for the learner's success in the educational system. Fostering a

⁴⁹ A. V. Petrakova, T. N. Kanonire, A. A. Kulikova, and E. A. Orel, Teachers under stress during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Bulletin of the Moscow City Pedagogical University. Series "Pedagogy and Psychology"*, 4(58) (2020); <https://doi.org/10.25688/2076-9121.2021.58.4.05>

⁵⁰ Marko, *Hearing the Unheard Voices: An in-Depth Look at Teacher Mental Health and Wellness*.

⁵¹ M. G. Sanders, and S. B. Sheldon, *Principals matter: A guide to school, family, and community partnerships*. (Corwin: A SAGE Company), 2009.

⁵² Anne T Henderson and Nancy Berla, *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement*. (ERIC, 1994); S. B. Sheldon, *In School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, 3rd ed. (USA: Corwin Press, 2009). S. A. Richardson, “Principal's perceptions of parental involvement in the “big 8” urban districts of Ohio.” *Research in the Schools*, 16(1), (2009); 1–12.

⁵³ D. H. Arnold, A. Zeljo and G. L. Doctoroff, “Parent involvement in preschool: predictors and the relation of involvement to preliteracy development.” *School Psychology Review*, 37(1), (2008); 74-90; Douglas R Powell et al., “Parent-School Relationships and Children's Academic and Social Outcomes in Public School Pre-Kindergarten,” *Journal of School Psychology* 48, no. 4 (2010): 269–92.

relationship between the school and the parent will improve the child's learning, hence parents are encouraged to support the school as it will benefit the learner.⁵⁴

Adapting traditional teaching methods for online education during the Covid-19 pandemic

According to the data, the learners that the participants in this study teach have a variety of special educational needs, and teaching them online is inappropriate for them because, in many cases, they lack the mental and physical capacity to use an online learning environment. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift from traditional in-person instruction to a fully online approach utilizing a variety of technical tools and internet-based learning platforms.⁵⁵ However, the transition from in-person instruction to online learning was difficult, especially for learners with special needs who had a hard time adjusting to a new learning environment.⁵⁶ Learning at home restricts the amount of professional support that can be provided to learners with special educational needs.⁵⁷ To meet their educational needs, learners with special needs must be accommodated through specific learning materials and learning platforms, so that they can be able to complete specific learning tasks and evaluations.⁵⁸

The implementation of Covid-19 regulations in a special needs classroom

The findings of this study indicate that implementing COVID-19 regulations in a classroom for learners with special needs was not easy for special education and learning support educators to do. The rule of wearing facemasks in the classroom was particularly difficult for the learners to adhere to, as they did not understand the reasons behind why they should wear a facemask. Facemasks ended up causing a barrier between teachers and learners as they hindered effective communication from taking place. The learners could not hear what the teacher was saying in class, and they could not see any facial expressions from the teacher. This confirms the research by Spitzer, who revealed the difficulty of getting students to observe the protocols, as some of the learners need to see the teacher's facial expression to understand what the teacher is saying.⁵⁹ Adhering to the social distancing rule was also challenging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Participants in this study indicated that they experienced a heavy workload during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore it is recommended that schools that cater for learners with special needs have permanent teaching assistants in classrooms. These assistants can thus help in attending to the needs of the learners and also support educators in the classroom so that they are not burdened with a heavy workload.
2. Among the different challenges that the participants of this study encountered, the data indicated that special education instructors and learning support professionals were worried about the global promotion of online instruction amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason participants were concerned about this change was that (a) none of them had any prior experience teaching learners with special needs using an online learning environment. (b) They were unsure about how to set up an inclusive online classroom. (c) The learners in their classes demonstrated a variety of unique requirements, some of which precluded the learners from learning using an online approach. The effective use of technology in education can only occur when teachers receive the necessary training to incorporate technology into their lesson plans, curricula, and traditional teaching methods. Therefore, it is recommended that teacher preparation programs include an online

⁵⁴ M. Đurišić and M. Bunijevec, Parental Involvement as a Important Factor for Successful Education. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 7(3), (2017); 137-153.

⁵⁵ Longjun Zhou et al., "'School's Out, But Class's On', The Largest Online Education in the World Today: Taking China's Practical Exploration During The COVID-19 Epidemic Prevention and Control as an Example," *Best Evidence of Chinese Education* 4, no. 2 (March 16, 2020): 501–19, <https://doi.org/10.15354/bece.20.ar023>.

⁵⁶ Edwin Darrell De Klerk and June Monica Palmer, "Technology Inclusion for Students Living with Disabilities through Collaborative Online Learning during and beyond COVID-19," *Perspectives in Education* 40, no. 1 (2022): 80–95.

⁵⁷ Donatella Rita Petretto, Iliaria Masala, and Carmelo Masala, "Special Educational Needs, Distance Learning, Inclusion and COVID-19," *Education Sciences* 10, no. 6 (June 3, 2020): 154, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10060154>.

⁵⁸ Greg Conderman, Lisa Liberty, and Stephanie DeSpain, "Understanding Accommodations, Modifications, and Interventions," *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 53, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 70–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2017.1299545>.

⁵⁹ Spitzer, "Masked education? The benefits and burdens of wearing face masks in schools during the current" 100138.

pedagogy module in which teachers will learn the fundamentals of using an online platform to teach and assess learners with special needs. The Department of Education therefore needs to organise workshops where educators who work with learners who have special needs will learn how to use various teaching and learning tools to instruct these learners and to also meet the various demands of the learners that they teach.

3. To enable the participants in this study to deal with the psychological repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher believes that the participants in this study should have received psychological support, such as online counselling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic was a new phenomenon for all, and the participants in this study were not prepared to handle the stress and anxiety brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study identified that the participants experienced an absence of psychological support from the schools where they worked during the pandemic. Thus, it is advised that for future practice, schools should invest in a specialist who will provide counselling services, for educators. In this way, educators will have access to psychological support, which would help them resolve any psychological issues they may be having. This makes it a valuable resource that schools can use.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study aimed to identify the various factors contributing to stress and anxiety among special needs and learning support educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was motivated by the limited existing literature addressing the causes of stress and anxiety for these educators in Gauteng during this unprecedented period. Consequently, the study sought to elucidate these factors and document the experiences of special needs and learning support educators, thereby contributing to the academic discourse and providing recommendations to inform future practices. By identifying the challenges faced by special education and learning support educators and understanding how these challenges induce stress and anxiety, the findings can assist the Department of Education, policymakers, and schools in developing targeted strategies to mitigate stressors in the working environments of these educators.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest with respect to this research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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