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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SPECIAL EDUCATION LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN THE RURAL SCHOOL SETTING

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Abstract

This study examined the best practices and insights gained that will impact future practice in the rural special education setting with the return to post-COVID instruction. Hattie (2021) highlighted the importance of reflecting on what went right and encouraged schools to discuss the evidence of success during the pandemic school year. Following the scholar-practitioner framework, two special education directors in the rural central Texas area share their experiences during the pandemic and offer insight into new practices and procedures they are implementing post-COVID. Four common themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (a) the importance of technology, (b) changes in instructional practices, (c) barriers to student success, and (d) communication structures. This article aims to guide rural special education leaders as they continue to navigate instructional and financial challenges post-pandemic.

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Introduction:-

This study examined the lessons learned and insights gained that will impact future practice in rural special education as schools return to post-COVID instruction. Following the scholar-practitioner framework, two special education directors who serve in rural settings shared their experiences during the pandemic and reflected on new practices and procedures planned to be implemented post-COVID. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts have found that providing services to students with disabilities has become a much more significant challenge. For example, some school districts provided education to all students remotely, which made providing special education services to students with disabilities almost impossible and put many students even further behind their peers than they originally were (Turner & Klein, 2021). According to Wright and Wright (2021), in schools that closed completely where no students received educational services, students with disabilities also were not entitled to educational benefits.

In contrast, some schools stayed open but issued work packets that students completed at home each week. School district employees and teachers created packets for family members to pick up from the school so students could complete the work and return it to the school either in person or by mail (TEA, n.d.). School closures and packets put students behind in their educational learning, especially students with disabilities.

Research Questions

In their own words, the special education directors explained responses to three crucial questions.

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1. Post-pandemic, will there be any modification in the delivery of special education services?
2. What did you learn during the pandemic that will help you monitor assessments and IEP updates?
3. What strategies/programs/systems did you use during the pandemic that you will continue to use to meet the needs of students?

Background

The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1997 requires students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 1997). For many students with disabilities, the least restrictive environment (LRE) is in a general education classroom; therefore, IDEA's requirement has increased the number of students identified with disabilities to be educated in general education classrooms. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas K-12 public schools serve 587,987 students under IDEA. More than 63% of those students spend at least 80% of their educational time in the general education classroom (TEA, 2020). Unfortunately, students with disabilities lag educationally behind their non-disabled counterparts (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2021). Accommodations are provided for students with disabilities in a general education classroom. Accommodations include adapting classroom materials, oral assignments, quizzes, and tests. Sometimes, a paraprofessional is needed to help students stay focused or provide extra instruction and help (TEA, 2022).

Scholar-Practitioner Framework

The scholar-practitioner framework relies on the educational leader being physically and emotionally involved in the work providing "...knowledge of practice in the realm of educational administration" (Shultz, 2010, p. 53). An educational leader that is genuinely present allows for constructive decision-making. During the COVID-19 pandemic, "business as usual" practices changed to what will help teachers, parents, and students succeed. Instructional leaders must be ready to implement changes necessary for student success and legal integrity.

Challenges in Serving Special Education Students in the Rural Setting

Emotional, social, communication, and policy barriers affect students with disabilities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022), but the COVID-19 pandemic created more. The closing of schools hindered students from gaining knowledge used in finding jobs after graduation (Bouronikos, 2022); IEP meetings and classes normally held in person became non-existent, requiring other communication forms, and federal and state policies that "guaranteed equal participation" (Bouronikos, 2022) were no longer available. Each barrier stifled students learning and growth.

Before 2019, the US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (2022) contends that over 7,000 infringements occurred regarding "equal access to their schools' educational programming and other activities under Federal disability-discrimination laws" p. 22. In addition, "COVID-19 has significantly disrupted the education and related aids and services needed to support their academic progress and prevent regression. Moreover, there are signs that those disruptions may exacerbate long-standing disability-based disparities in academic achievement" (Goldberg, 2021, p. iv). Today, cases investigated regarding denial or inappropriate special education services have increased significantly across the United States (US Department of Education, 2022).

Current Study

This study aimed to understand and offer guidance on best practices that will impact future practice in the rural special education setting post-pandemic. Brock et al. (2020) stated, "To be successful in the future in the reopening of schools and addressing future crises, instructional leaders must be able to engage in the scholar-practitioner model of critical reflection and analysis to ascertain which strategies worked and which ones did not work within the context of the dramatic changes that occurred on their campuses."

Rural school districts face multiple challenges in providing special education services. These challenges include a lack of available resources targeted for education in the rural setting, ongoing personnel shortages, and the influences of rural poverty (Rude & Miller, 2017). However, there were also strengths for rural school districts. Tremmel et al. (2020) noted the history of strong relationships with students and family members, community and family partnerships, and strong communication contributed to rural school district success.

This study used qualitative data to share the lived experiences and insights gained from two rural special education directors. The data allowed the rural special education directors to share their greatest challenges, how they worked

to overcome them, and practices they will continue to implement post-pandemic. The qualitative nature of the study will offer insight to policymakers, teachers, and special education leaders.

Methodology:-

Participants

The participants in this study include two special education directors from 4A rural, remote school districts in central Texas with student populations of just under 4,000. The National Center for Education Statistics (2022) defines rural remote as a rural territory more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

The special education director in district one has over 20 years of experience in EC-12 education, including three years as a director of special education. This director holds certification as a Licensed Specialist in School Psychology. For 2020-21, the school year enrollment for district one was 3,645 students, with 415 students receiving special education services. (TAPR, 2021). Table 1 demonstrates district one demographics.

The special education director for district two has over 15 years of experience in EC-12 education, including five years as the director of special education. This director holds Texas teaching certifications in EC-12 special education, educational diagnostician, and principal. For the 2020-21 school year, the district enrollment was 3,697 students, with 587 of those students receiving special education services (TAPR, 2021). Table 2 demonstrates district two demographics.

Table 1:- District One Demographics.

Race of Students	Number of Students
American Indian	8
Asian	51
Hispanic	1333
Black	48
White	2118
Pacific Islander	1
Two or more races	100

Note. Demographics breakdown of students in District One. Texas Education Agency. (2021). Texas Academic Performance Reports. Assessment Division. Retrieved from: <http://tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/index.html>

Table 2:- District Two Demographics.

Race of Students	Number of Students
American Indian	7
Asian	32
Hispanic	2242
Black	48
White	911
Pacific Islander	0
Two or more races	102

Note. Demographics breakdown of students in District Two. Texas Education Agency. (2021). Texas Academic Performance Reports. Assessment Division. Retrieved from: <http://tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/index.html>

Procedure:-

Each special education director was asked to provide a narrative response to three questions. Inductive thematic analysis analyzed the narrative responses. This type of qualitative analysis is used to classify and present themes as they relate to the data. The inductive thematic process calls for generating initial codes and themes, defining the themes, then producing a final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To assist in identifying common themes and to allow for real-time collaboration, the written responses from the special education directors were imported to Taguette. Taguette is an open-source computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Rampin&Rampin, 2021.). Taguette

supports qualitative inquiry of text materials and assists researchers in organizing, collaborating, and analyzing data (Rampin&Rampin, 2021). Once imported, the documents were converted to HTML format using Calibrebook manager, allowing for the imported data to be highlighted and organized using hierarchical tags. The tags were exported into an Excel spreadsheet and categorized into four common themes.

Results:-

The findings of the study resulted in four common themes: (1) the importance of technology, (2) changes in instructional practices, (3) barriers to student success, and (4) communication structures. A total of 17 sub-themes emerged to determine the four themes. Sub Themes included in the importance of technology included (a) Online Instruction, (b) Electronic Signature, (c) Brigance, and (d) electronic instructional applications. MAPS, NWEA, and IXL codes were grouped as they are all electronic instructional applications. The theme of instructional practices included five sub-themes: (a) strategies, (b) accommodations, (c) PLAAFP- Present Levels of Academic and Functional Performance, (d) instruction, and (e) assessment. Within the barriers to student success, there were four sub-themes: (a) flexibility, (b) barriers, (c) post-pandemic, and (d) transfer student data. The theme of communication structures had three sub-themes: (a) collaboration, (b) follow-up, and (c) communication.

Table 3:- Directors' Narrative Responses.

Theme/Code	Example Statements
Importance of Technology	
MAPS, NWEA, IXL (4)	"There are measures that everyone uses on campuses with various programs, including NWEA, IXL, and MAPS. "
Brigance (2)	"In an effort to provide a more individualized ongoing level, we purchased Brigance testing to assist with understanding where the student is functioning academically throughout the year."
Electronic Signature (4)	"Additionally, we have adopted the use of electronic signatures and electronic delivery of IEP and FIE documents. Parents still have the right to request a paper copy, but the standard is electronic. "
Instructional Practices	
Strategies (10)	"Many of our service providers and some elementary SPED teachers utilized Boom cards during their interactions. This strategy appears to continue to be a resource the teachers and other services use when students return to face-to-face."
Accommodations (4)	"During the pandemic, there were several occurrences where special education teachers would review the materials prior to distribution and making the necessary modifications/accommodations."
PLAAFP (9)	"Our district utilizes MAPS and NWEA testing data to assist with identifying present levels of academic performance. Additionally, the Brigance that we purchased should further aid in understanding where the student is functioning in relation to grade level instruction."
Instruction (19)	"Providing inclusion in the virtual classroom is in and of itself uniquely difficult. In the classroom, the Special Education teacher has the ability to move around the classroom and provide assistance without particularly singling anyone out. For virtual instruction, it typically involved arranging to work specifically with each student who had follow-up questions."
IEP (4)	"This includes a program that was purchased where inclusion time is logged, and IEP goals are also documented when worked on. This program will automatically update goals to ensure compliance."
Assessment (4)	"Having committee members discuss the implications of the pandemic and

	review the complete profile/history of the student's academic/emotional progress is even more critical. All students were impacted by the pandemic; therefore, these discussions are even more essential. Identifying individual needs and making recommendations has become even more difficult."
Barriers to Student Success	
Flexibility (2)	"The main thing is to remain flexible. Just because something has always been done that way does not mean it is the only way and, honestly, may not even be the best way."
Barriers (11)	"The students who were several grade levels below struggled significantly with the content in the general education classroom. The support they required during the virtual services was more significant and individualized."
Post-Pandemic (9)	"An area of future concern with Full and Individual Evaluations will include new referrals. Having committee members discuss the implications of the pandemic and review the complete profile/history of the student's academic/emotional progress is even more critical."
Transfer Student Data (2)	"We have received many transfer students who had their FIEs completed and/or considered during the pandemic timeframe. Some states engaged in very different strategies to complete FIEs."
Communication	
Collaboration (8)	"Assessment staff did work to find a way to collaborate with other staff completing the assessment with them to minimize any duplication concerns and prioritize tests administered."
Follow-up (4)	"On the secondary level, that was more challenging. The discussions still took place, but follow-up time with each student became necessary. Ensuring that follow-up happened created several challenges."
Communication (13)	"Essentially, we are really promoting an increased reliance on electronic communication to facilitate continual conversation and to maintain documentation of notification."

Note. Example quotes from special education directors in each sub-theme.

Importance of Technology

Public education has evolved as a result of technology. Since the mid-1970s, when computers came to fruition, educators have contemplated their potential in promoting student learning (Hew & Brush, 2007). In this study, the importance of technology was a common theme. Both special education directors noted a heavier reliance on technology for instructional and compliance purposes. Both districts were equipped with one-to-one technology before the pandemic. Director One works in a district that utilizes iPads, and Director Two works in a district that uses Chromebooks. The sub-themes for online instruction and electronic applications had 12 occurrences in the narrative responses. Director One stated, "Our district had already implemented one-to-one technology; this was a critical aspect of our continuation of services both during the pandemic and beyond." Both directors also mentioned using electronic curriculum applications, specifically NWEA, MAPS, and IXL to assist in identifying each student's present level of academic and functional performance (PLAAFP). Another common theme in both narratives included using electronic signatures and electronic delivery of individualized education plans (IEPs) and individual evaluation (FIE) documents. The electronic signature sub-theme had four occurrences. Director one noted, "From an assessment staff standpoint, the use of DocuSign was essential in being able to meet required deadlines." Similarly, Director Two stated, "Additionally, we have adopted the use of electronic signatures and

electronic delivery of IEP and FIE documents. Parents still have the right to request a paper copy, but the standard is electronic.”

Warschauer (2007) found that effective use of technology would facilitate the development of students' communication, problem-solving, creativity, and other high-level skills. The results in this study hold Warschauer's findings true in that both directors found multiple benefits from using technology.

Instructional Practices

Instructional practices were the study's most common sub-theme, with 19 occurrences. Both directors explained that they had made significant changes to delivering instruction post-pandemic. Director One stated, “post-pandemic, it is incumbent upon admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) committees to clearly define what each individual student requires to be educationally successful. The ARD committee must specify if a student needs assistance following direct teaching instruction or do they require individualized instruction.” The directors also noted specific instructional strategies such as Boom Cards and job boxes. The strategy sub-theme had ten occurrences. In an example of the strategy sub-theme, Director One explained, “Many of the life skills classroom teachers and some of the resource teachers utilized packets/job boxes. These were prepared, in advance, for the upcoming week and used in conjunction with scheduled zoom/virtual classroom discussions. This process has been continued in some cases when rotating useful tasks boxes for completion within the classroom setting.” IEP updates were noted as a sub-theme with four occurrences. Director Two explained that an online program was purchased that automatically updates goals to ensure compliance.

The sub-theme of present levels of academic and functional performance had nine occurrences. Director One stated, “Establishing additional methods for identifying the need for services appears to be essential. Having clear data to analyze current present levels of performance was highlighted as an essential piece in creating the appropriate placement.” Director One also noted, “In an effort to provide a more individualized ongoing level, we purchased Brigance testing to assist with understanding where the student is functioning academically throughout the year.” The accommodations sub-theme had four occurrences. Both special education directors noted the difficulty in providing accommodations in a virtual environment. Director One developed a procedure where special education teachers followed up with each student to ensure their needs were met. Director Two utilized a virtual curriculum to ensure that each student received the necessary accommodations.

Barriers to Student Success

Flexibility

Flexibility is not a barrier to student success, but being inflexible in a school setting is. It is inappropriate and a must for all schools, teachers, and administrators. The sub-theme of flexibility had two occurrences. As Director Two stated, “The main thing is to be flexible. Just because something has always been done that way does not mean it is the only way, and honestly, may not even be the best way.” If the pandemic has taught anything, without flexibility, all students will be left behind. Although the COVID-19 pandemic put students behind in their education, it has opened up a conversation regarding what needs to be done to help all students succeed (Morabito, 2022).

Post-Pandemic

The post-pandemic has provided opportunities to change how education is provided to America's students. It is time to catch students up from the shutdown of schools. According to the Report Card on American Education (2022), seven states garnered a B, with the majority coming in with Cs. Director Two noted, “We have adapted a heavier reliance on technology to ensure teaching...and will continue to utilize it in the foreseeable future.” Providing one-on-one with students using technology may be the ultimate way to catch students up. In this study the sub-theme of post-pandemic was widely found as occurring nine times throughout the narrative responses.

Barriers

The directors found numerous barriers limiting student success, for example, identifying where individual students are functioning academically, defining specific IEP goals and objectives that include additional steps to meet overall goals, and increasing inclusion support. Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, both directors have made strides to address the barriers found by following up with special education and general education teachers regarding student levels of academic performance, increasing communication and collaboration, and adding inclusion support. The study showed the importance of removing barriers for students with disabilities as it was found to occur 11 times in the narrative responses.

Communication

Student success becomes hindered when communication breaks down. Communication is essential between faculty, staff, and parents, especially concerning students with disabilities. As Fardila (2018) pointed out, “Communication...[is] the main tool of academic achievement, psychological achievement, and for student physical and mental development” (p. 20). COVID-19 interrupted normal communication channels between parents and faculty, especially when updating or making changes to IEPs. As mentioned previously, annual IEP meetings were held in person before the pandemic closed schools causing IEP meetings to be conducted in new ways. Director Two corroborated the importance of communication and technology as recording the special education meetings provided a way for those not able to attend to have the same firsthand information as those in attendance. The recordings also eliminated miscommunication or errors that could happen when those necessary to be in attendance could not and provided more opportunities for parents to attend, especially if they were working during the meeting—conducting the meetings through Zoom eliminated parents from having to take off work. IDEA permits using technology when conducting IEP meetings (US Department of Education, 2019); therefore, technology, particularly Zoom, became the tool to bring schools and parents together for student success.

Another essential element of communication was between special education and general education teachers. Director One stated, “In many cases, the students would have questions following larger classroom zooms. This illustrated the importance of communication between the general education teacher and special education teacher.” Keeping communication intact during the pandemic; special education teachers had “designated times to check in with their students and discuss their concerns and answer questions,” Director One noted.

Collaboration

Communication and collaboration are crucial to student success. Although some might think the two are separate entities, without communication, collaboration is mute as noted in the findings of having occurred 13 times within the study. Faculty and staff have higher collaboration rates due to a family-like atmosphere within campuses and districts (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). The collaboration allowed special educators to work cohesively in finding solutions to providing services to special education students, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaboration between paraprofessionals, behavior therapists, occupational therapists, and other service providers is necessary to provide special education services under an IEP and IDEA (IDEIA, 2004). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, required services and students with disabilities received education in their appropriate, least restrictive environment. With the pandemic onset and school closures, providing students with disabilities with the required services became difficult. One California school district created a distance learning model to provide students with required services, including school and county administrators, parents, teachers, and interventionists (Frederick et al., 2020). This model provided services in-person using safe distances and deep cleaning to prevent the spreading of the disease and quickly transitioned to full online intervention (Frederick et al., 2020). In addition, with IDEA's requirement for students with disabilities to be in their LRE (IDEA, 1997), “case manager[s] to have an ongoing discussion[s] with general education teachers to ensure comprehension pertaining to the relevant designated services,” Director one stated.

Discussion:-

In summary, the rural special education directors have demonstrated resilience and perseverance to improve instructional practices and strengthen special education policies and procedures from their lived experiences through the pandemic. O'Shea and Zuckerman (2022) noted that the rural context has influence over leadership practices. The directors in this study used similar leadership practices in addressing the challenges they faced.

It is evident that the ability to serve students in a rural setting and maintain compliance would not have been possible during the pandemic without technology. This study exemplifies the importance of one-to-one technology. With the use of technology, these directors have created stronger communication structures and instructional practices for all stakeholders. Post-pandemic, the directors have continued to use technology such as electronic signatures, virtual meetings and online instructional tools to better serve students. Changes in instructional practice were necessary for both districts. To meet the needs of special education students, online curriculums such NWEA and IXL were utilized. These online curriculums allowed teachers and district personnel to better track the students present level of academic and functional performance. These programs also provided data for the development of IEP goals and objectives.

These authors' goal is that the data findings will help to improve rural special education services, increase the success of students with disabilities, and decrease the number of infringements upon rural school districts.

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