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Examining One Teacher's Practices in Supporting Students with Exceptionalities in an Online Setting

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**Examining One Teacher's Practices in Supporting Students with
Exceptionalities in an Online Setting**

by

Alyson Hepler

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors Interdisciplinary in Elementary Education
in the College of Community Innovation and Education
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Thesis Chair: Andrea Gelfuso, Ph.D.

Abstract

This thesis explored how students with exceptionalities learned literacy skills in an online learning environment and how the teacher was supported in the online classroom environment through professional development. Analysis of classroom observations and interviews with a teacher, resulted in five findings: (1) There was limited professional development for teaching exceptional education students online. (2) Meeting exceptional student educational needs in the online environment was challenging for the teacher. (3) During the teacher's online lessons there were some elements of literacy present such as comprehension and real-world examples. (4) The teacher missed out on some key components for literacy development with exceptional students in an online learning environment. (5) The exceptional students in the online learning environment did not have access to classroom tools.

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I was anxious entering this process of writing a thesis, but I am leaving a stronger student, writer, and all-around person. I am excited to see what the future holds for students with exceptionalities in an online learning environment.

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Introduction

Exceptional education is a crucial part of every school across the nation. It is a field in which educators work every day to ensure a fair and equal education for all students. Due to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world of education has taken a drastic hit with having to move online, put social distancing in place, and eliminate group work in classrooms.

When schools went virtual in March 2020 due to the effects of COVID-19, many questions were raised, such as:

- How are students getting an adequate education?
- How do schools expect a student to sit on a computer all day?
- How are teachers going to feel prepared to teach in an online setting?
- What are the school, county, and state doing to ensure that all parties involved in education are ready to take on the role of online learning?

A question that came to my mind during these troubling times was how students with exceptional needs were being supported in online learning environments? It is documented that exceptional education students have different learning needs than general education students (<https://www.ed.gov>), and I was curious to know how their needs were being met in this new online environment.

One of the reasons for my focus on exceptional education students is my connection to this group of students. My younger brother is gifted, putting him under the umbrella of being an

exceptional student. He receives extra support in his day-to-day academic life with a stimulating environment. Knowing him, I doubted an online learning environment would be the stimulating curriculum he needed to thrive in an educational setting. Although my connection to exceptional education is through the gifted lens, I chose to focus on the group of students with disabilities due to them falling behind their classroom peers in a general education setting.

In addition to my focus of supporting exceptional education students' needs, I focused mainly on literacy. Literacy is a subject that is essential in schools due to seeing it across multiple subject areas. Also, I was a student who always struggled in literacy, and without the in-person support of my schools and teachers, I would not be where I am today. Combining all of the above factors of relevancy and connection, I concluded that this was a topic I wanted to further research.

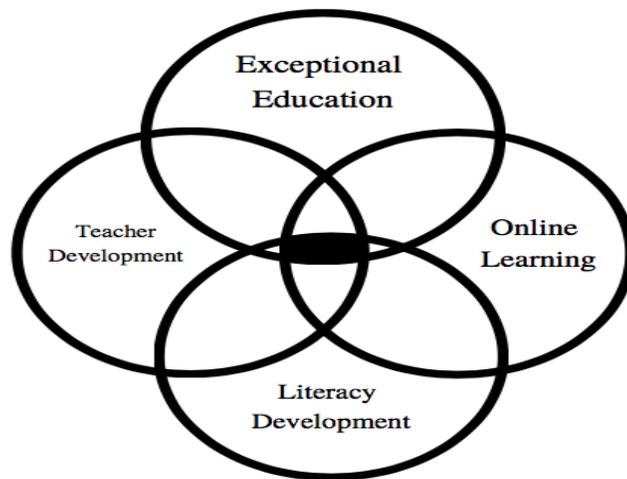


Figure 1: Intersections of this research

Figure 1 shows how my work is situated within exceptional education, online learning, literacy development, and teacher development. I looked at factors that exceptional education

classrooms face: online learning, teacher development in online learning, and literacy development. This study looked at how these factors combined to support exceptional students' education. The following two research questions guided this study.

- How does one teacher support her exceptional education students with literacy development in an online learning environment?
- How does the school provide the teacher the professional development she needs in order to educate her exceptional students via an online learning environment?

Below, I demonstrate my understanding of online learning, exceptional student education, and literacy development. My knowledge of these topics guided my work in this study.

Online Learning

In the past ten years, there has been a steady growth in online learning. According to Education Week (2017) online learning became a popular tool around 2002, starting with an estimated 317,000 students enrolled. In 2015, there was an increase of 2.7 million students enrolled in an online learning environment. (Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/online-classes/index.html>).

Teachers are now adapting to online learning more than ever due to COVID-19. With resources available such as Skype, Google Classroom, Zoom, etc., teachers and students are now engaging in what is known as distance learning. Distance learning is where a student participates in school from home. There are many different distance learning designs (e.g., correspondence courses, telecourses, CD-ROM, online learning, and mobile learning). These designs include

some way for the student to communicate with her/his teacher from another location that is not at school. A popular distance learning design that America is starting to use is online learning.

Online learning is education over the internet (Stern, n.d.).

Online learning can be expressed in many ways, but there are two dominant methods that I focused on in my research, virtual school and connect learning. In a virtual school design, the student moves at their own pace with the teacher's online modules. The teacher posts a new week's work on Monday, and the students move at their own pace through those modules. They are typically due at the end of the week, but they can choose what they would like to do. If they want to do the Math on Monday, English on Tuesday, etc., or want to get all their work done in one to two days, they can. How the students pace themselves through the module is up to their discretion, as long as the work is completed by the time the teacher sets a due date.

A connected learning design allows for synchronous interaction. The student interacts with their teacher via Skype, Google Classroom, Zoom, etc. The teacher will open a video chat at the beginning of the school day, and the students will stay on all day. The teacher will teach in front of the computer as if the students are in the classroom. The teacher expects the students to be at the computer when the morning bell rings thru when school lets out. The student should be in a quiet area of their house and not distracted by parents, siblings, pets, etc. They are allowed a break during recess and lunch but must log back on after those are over to continue school for the day. For this study, both virtual school and connect learning are being discussed when I refer to an online learning environment.

Pros and Cons of Online Learning

Online learning environments are something new and abstract to many. According to the University of Illinois (retrieved from <https://www.uis.edu/ion/resources/tutorials/online-education-overview/strengths-and-weaknesses/>), there are many pros and cons to online learning. Below, I summarize the pros:

- Students can participate anywhere in the world as long as they have a computer and internet connection.
- The online classroom is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This accessibility allows students to participate when it is convenient for them.
- The student may go at any pace they would like in their school work. They have continuous access to lectures, course materials, and class discussions. This access allows the students to review material if need be.
- Interaction allows for a dynamic interaction between the teacher and student. Resources and ideas can be shared while each individual can contribute to the discussion.
- The students can have high-quality dialog. The student has time to think and articulate responses for their peers. This wait time can lead to high-quality discussions among teachers and peers.
- Students control their learning experience because they can control what they respond to and put their efforts. Students will be making their contributions to the course.
- They can have access to resources worldwide to enhance their learning experience.
- A majority of teachers have a solid foundation for teaching in a face-to-face setting. This new learning environment allows teachers to get creative with what they already know and apply it to something new.

Although online teaching has some great attributes to a student's learning, with the positives of online learning, there are also some negatives. Some of the cons are, (retrieved from <https://www.uis.edu/ion/resources/tutorials/online-education-overview/strengths-and-weaknesses/>):

- Students who do not have access to a computer or internet cannot be considered for this learning, making it non-accessible for those students.

- Both the teacher and student must have a minimum level of computer knowledge. If they cannot perform the necessary task, they will not be receiving or giving proper education.
- Computers can break down, thus slowing down the learning process. If the student cannot access the material, they can fall behind, distracting from the learning experience.
- Students who need support with their learning may struggle with an online learning environment. The student must be very self-driven and motivated to succeed in an online learning environment. Unfortunately, not every student is an independent learner.
- The student is not receiving the teacher's proper communication; the teacher must compensate for the lack of physical presence.
- If the administration and faculty have a lack of knowledge with online learning, they will not help them perform in this environment.
- If a large class is online, the whole energy of the classroom could change. The dialog could be limited, and there is limited interaction among participants.
- A successful face-to-face curriculum may not translate well in an online environment. This gap could then cause a learning gap with the student, thus changing the curriculum around to ensure the students achieve their standards.

Overall, online learning is a valuable resource for specific needs, such as a pandemic, or for students who may benefit from it, such as those who are bedridden. The online environment allows for the opportunity to expand learning and provide education through a variety of formats. For online learning to succeed, the teacher and students must have the proper tools and resources to thrive such as basic computer knowledge, internet, and technology. (Retrieved from <https://www.uis.edu/ion/resources/tutorials/online-education-overview/strengths-and-weaknesses>).

Students with Exceptionalities

Students with exceptionalities are starting to be recognized more in school settings, with accommodations put in place in order to help them learn and meet their specific needs. Students with exceptionalities are children who have special learning needs, including gifted and those

who have disabilities (What Is Exceptional Student Education for Children Who Are Gifted?, 2011). In the literature review, I will provide more detail on students with exceptional needs. For this study's purpose, when I refer to students with exceptionalities, I focus on students with disabilities.

Various Exceptionalities

Exceptional students learn differently from general classroom students based on what they need and what the teacher, school, and guardian see as best for the student (<https://www.ed.gov>). Therefore, they are protected under specific laws and rights to ensure they receive the best education possible. Students who are provided these resources according to the IDEA act (Retrieved from; <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.8>) are students with

- **Learning disabilities-** a disorder in one or more basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language (spoken or written) can become the inability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or use mathematics. Examples of this are brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.
- **Emotional disorders-** the inability to learn and cannot be explained intellectually, inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances, general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression, tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with a person or school problems. An example of this is schizophrenia.
- **Deaf and Hearing impairment-** The child has impaired hearing, causing them to struggle in processing linguistic information through hearing with or without amplification.
- **Visual impairment-** Impairment in vision that negatively affects a child's educational performance.
- **Speech or language impairment-** communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or voice impairment.
- **Developmental delay-** Children aged three through nine, such as delayed physical development, cognitive development, communication development, social or emotional development, or adaptive development.

- **Autism**- developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction. It can also show repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual response to sensory experiences.
- **Intellectual disability**- Significantly below average general intellectual functioning, along with deficits in adaptive behavior.
- **Multiple disabilities**- having more than one disability which can cause severe educational needs. May not be able to accommodate special education programs.
- **Orthopedic impairment**- impairments caused by congenital abnormality, impairments caused by diseases, and impairments from other causes. These can include poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis, cerebral palsy, amputations, and fractures or burns that cause contractures.
- **Other health impairment**- having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including heightened alertness to the environment.
- **Traumatic brain injury**- an acquired injury to the brain caused by something external, resulting in partial disability or psychosocial impairment, or both.

There is a testing process to see if the student qualifies for the act's services. There could be more exceptional needs outside what has been outlined above; the ones listed are a general list.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) & Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)

Every student succeeds act is the most recent law that ensures an equal education for all students. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015) "The new law builds on key areas of progress in recent years, made possible by the efforts of educators, communities, parents, and students across the country." (Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov>). The ESSA legislation was put in place to ensure that every student receives the tools they need to succeed in the classroom. The ESSA legislation comes from the original idea of the IDEA legislation.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (1975)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the

nation and ensures special education and related service to those children (Retrieved from <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>).

The act states that every eligible child will receive a fair and equal education while provided the resources they need to succeed in an education setting. Teachers have been using the IDEA legislation for years to ensure equal education for students with learning disabilities. As stated earlier, students who qualify under IDEA have extra support in the classroom to ensure they reach educational goals. This additional support is now being changed due to the change in the learning environment for these students with the addition of the ESSA legislation.

Tools and Resources Provided for Students with Exceptionalities

It is essential to note the extra support that exceptional students receive due to their circumstances (retrieved from; A Parent's Introduction to Exceptional Student Education in Florida, n.d.).

- **Parent and student participation-** The laws state that parents should have a voice in all discussions and decisions about their child's education.
- **Appropriate evaluation-** Before deciding if a child is eligible for Exceptional Education, a team of people conducts an individual evaluation. The child will get evaluated periodically to see if they continue with the disability, and they can change their education program if need be.
- **Individual Educational Plan (IEP)-** A written agreement that tells the parent or guardian, the student, the teacher, and other school faculty what services are being provided to the student to ensure that their educational goals are met.
- **Free Appropriate Public Education-** Every student receiving exceptional services has the right to a free appropriate public education. This act ensures that the local public schools provide services designed to help students meet their annual goals at no cost to the parent or guardian.
- **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)-** Students with exceptional needs must be taught as much as possible in the general education classroom.
- **Procedural safeguards-** The school and district have to follow specific steps to ensure that the student with exceptional needs and related services meet each public-school student's needs with a disability.

Exceptional Students vs. General Classroom Students

Exceptional students' academic performance in school tends to fall below general population students. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, students who have exceptional learning needs that took the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2013 performed below average compared to their peers. In Reading, 69 percent of the below basic scores came from students with disabilities, while only 20 percent performed at level. The average for a student below basic without a disability was 27 percent. There is a 47 percent difference in numbers between the two groups of students. Over half the below-average scores from this test are from students with disabilities. These numbers show a significant gap between exceptional students and general classroom students' reading performance (The State of Learning Disabilities, 2014).

It is important to note that these scores report from face-to-face classroom instruction. With the new environment of online learning that is becoming prominent this past decade, a change in thinking is called for when considering how strategies that support students with exceptionalities may change within an online learning environment.

Exceptional Students and Online Learning

As of 2011, almost two million students with learning disabilities attended school online (Queen & Lewis, 2011). The reason for this high number is due to the appeal that online learning has for a student with disabilities, such as personalization, advantages of staying home and being watched by parents or guardians, working at their own pace, and a nurturing environment away from social and behavioral challenges (Thompson, Ferdig & Black, 2012). Due to online

learning becoming more popular among American students every day, there is a need for teachers to meet this high demand. With more teachers needed for this environment, professional development is needed to ensure that teachers have the proper training to provide the best education for their students.

Teachers and Online Learning with Exceptional Students

Given the growth of online learning environments, teachers are considering how they can meet exceptional students' needs. Online, the teacher must find and use new tools and resources to use via the internet to ensure that exceptional students receive the required Education per the IDEA and ESSA legislation. There is little support for teachers in regard to receiving training, guidance, or assistance when it comes to an online learning environment, and when adding a student with exceptional needs to that mix makes the support needed for teachers to succeed even less (Greer, Harvey, Burdette, & Bashamn, 2015). If teachers are not receiving the tools and resources they need to be successful instructors, then it is likely that the students are not receiving the proper amount of support they need to succeed in school.

Literacy Development for Exceptional Students

Students with exceptionalities fall behind their peers when it comes to literacy skills. According to Strickland, Boon, and Spencer (2013,p. 1), "More than 60 percent of students with specific learning disabilities struggle to learn to read." Since these students are already falling behind in a face-to-face setting, we now have to look at what schools are doing to fill this online learning environment gap. Proficient literacy skills relate to metacognitive reading comprehension, internal-external motivation, and reading level (Memis & Bozkurt, 2013). All of

these factors help a student with exceptional needs live a meaningful life. It will prepare them for the real world of communicating with friends and families, becoming independent, and lead to potential jobs if their disability allows them to do so (Memis & Bozkurt, 2013).

Research Questions

For this study, I observed and interviewed a teacher who supports students with exceptionalities focusing on their literacy development in an online setting. I explored two research questions.

- How does one teacher support her exceptional education students with literacy development in an online learning environment?
- How does the school provide the teacher the professional development she needs in order to educate her exceptional students via an online learning environment?

Literature Review

Online Learning for Exceptional Students

One question to ask is, what does online learning look like for exceptional students?

Greer, Harvey, Burdette, and Basham (2015) conducted a survey. They surveyed participants in 20 different states. They sent the surveys to state directors of special education for all 20 states; 16 of the directors chose to participate. The questions related to students with disabilities in an online setting pertaining to state policies, allocations of funds for support services, and tracking procedures.

The survey found that none of the states had protocols to meet exceptional students' needs in an online learning environment. In the study, one of the fifteen directors interviewed had a way of tracking students' performance in an online learning environment. This study's findings suggest that there is no way to track if intervention, accommodations, etc., are being met in an online classroom. Tracking is a vital tool, especially in an online learning environment. For state guidelines, the schools are required to keep the progress on record, but it would also benefit the student and teacher to ensure they are on the right track. If the teachers do not have a way to track progress, there is no way to see if they are improving or succeeding in online learning. Additionally, there was an apparent lack of consideration in online learning for exceptional education students, with none of the states having a plan to follow. There was also no plan from over half the states to look more into this in the future, even with online learning becoming more popular among students annually.

The authors also noted that education funding has recently decreased, meaning funding is falling for exceptional students. "To date, several researchers have investigated the expansion of special education services to online settings, as well as highlighted issues related to the provision of the services and funding" (Greer, Harvey, Burdette, & Bashamn, 2015). This funding also goes into training teachers for exceptional students' online settings; with little funding available, there is not much room to train teachers for this particular group of students in a new environment, making the teachers responsible for supporting students with exceptionalities in online spaces less prepared.

Professional Development and Online Learning

As the new wave of teaching comes in to play with online learning it is important that teachers have the proper tools they need in order to succeed in this online learning environment. When looking more closely at this new realm of education, there is a lack of teacher training, according to McQuirter (2020, p.49), "teachers in elementary and secondary teachers describe a feeling of isolation as they attempt to manage the complex technical, social, and pedagogical challenges presented by synchronous and asynchronous instruction." This shows they are not getting the support needed in order to feel successful in an online learning environment.

Teachers want to be successful in their online teaching for their students. In a survey conducted by Rivero (2020), 453 educators were surveyed nationwide and 80% stated they needed more professional development in order to better understand online learning. It is a responsibility of schools, counties, and states to provide the opportunities for teachers to learn, grow, and develop as teaching is constantly changing.

Exceptional Students' Online Performance vs. Performance in Traditional Schools

When looking at online learning for exceptional students, we need to look at if they benefit from online instruction. Exceptional students benefit from online education due to having health and behavioral risks that may be easier to maintain at home (Thompson, Ferdig & Black, 2012). A study conducted by Thompson, Ferdig, and Black (2012) compared the grades and data of face-to-face learning with online learning across all students. They did an observational study in three states that had a state-led online-school program. They contacted the parents via email to participate in an online survey. Around 1,1971 parents agreed to take the survey. The survey asked questions about basic demographics, the child's educational history, parental education, the Children with Special Health Care Needs (CSHCN) screener, and the child's experiences and academic achievement with the online class(es). According to this study, there was not much change reflected in online learning grades compared to face-to-face learning when looking at all students. What they did find, though, was that exceptional students had lower performance online compared to traditional classrooms, "While parents report equivalent educational achievement in online and traditional classrooms, controlling for known achievement risks suggest that CSHCN have lower performance in online than in traditional schools" (Thompson, Ferdig, and Black, 2012, p.1). Due to having lower performance, there is a lower chance of narrowing the achievement gap for exceptional students who may opt into online learning.

However, this study failed to report how accommodations were being met for the students. When looking at education for students with exceptionalities, these accommodations are vital to their success in education. If accommodations in an online learning environment are

not being utilized, this can be interpreted that there is less chance of these accommodations being applied for the students' benefit when it comes to an online learning environment.

The Teacher's Role in Online Learning for Exceptional Students

Teachers struggle meeting younger students' needs, especially those with exceptional needs (Coy, 2014). Some of the challenge's teachers face in an online environment are communication, task organization, and IEP development and implementation.

In regard to communication, the teacher must rely heavily on email and video chats to communicate with the students and their families. The family often has to help with this communication. They take on the role of "learning coach," being the primary contact for the student and teacher, going over work with them, or helping with something if the teacher is unavailable (Coy, 2014). Task organization is a significant component in and out of the virtual world of teaching. The teacher ensures that the standards are achieved without much hands-on activity on how they are met. The teacher has to get to know the curriculum, the family, and the online setting, all at the same time (Coy, 2014). Accommodations are available to be addressed via the teacher. The teacher can build these accommodations into the student's schedule, allowing for what would happen in a school setting to take place in an online environment.

Some benefits come with online instruction for students with exceptional needs. The student is getting more one-on-one attention that they need. Teachers can make an immediate decision about whether to reinforce a new concept or move onto the next topic by seeing the scores and data almost immediately (Coy, 2014).

However, the online learning environment for students with exceptional needs is new territory for many teachers. The article states, "Professional development is also extremely important. Teachers considering this move should find out what types of professional development are required and what types of ongoing support are provided throughout the school year" (Coy, 2014, p.116). This statement shows that online learning can be successful for students, but there needs to be proper training and support for teachers to help them thrive in this environment.

Effective Literacy Instruction for Students with Exceptionalities

In this study, I focused on literacy development with exceptional students in an online learning environment. To get an idea of literacy development for students with exceptionalities, I took a closer look at how literacy is taught in face-to-face classrooms. There have been studies and tests showing that students with exceptional needs fall behind their general classroom peers when it comes to literacy instruction (i.e., NAEP).

There are different types of instruction that can help exceptional students with their learning needs. Teachers can use explicit instruction, progression through the essential reading skills, one-to-one individualized instruction, and progress monitoring (Carter, 2017).

Explicit instruction is when a teacher demonstrates skills, guides student practice, reports helpful feedback, and provides distributed and cumulative practice (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

- The demonstration of skill is when students are shown and told what to do. It could look like showing a letter on the screen while the teacher says the letter's name and the sound.

- Guided practice is when the teacher provides support and direction to ensure the student is applying what they have learned.
- Giving helpful feedback is a significant component in literacy instruction that can ensure a student is learning; it reduces students' chance of practicing with errors. Going over answers right after an activity or leaving comments that can help the student improve are useful feedback tools.
- Distributed and cumulative practice happens across a period of time and integrates what has been taught. Including previous skills that ensures that the student keeps up with the standards throughout the year, and nothing gets lost over time.

Another way to ensure adequate literacy development for students with exceptionalities is a progression through essential reading skills. It is important to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, automatic word recognition, vocabulary, and comprehension (Carter, 2017).

- **Phonemic awareness** is "the ability to perceive the sound units of words" (Carter, 2017). Students with disabilities have been shown to have low phonemic awareness and need explicit instruction to develop an awareness of these sound with words (Torgesen et al., 2001; de Groot, van den Bos, van der Meulen, & Minnaert, 2015; de Groot, van den Bos, Minnaert, & van der Meulen, 2014).
- **Phonics** is the ability to understand how sounds are represented by letters. To teach phonics to students, the instruction should be systematic and explicit (Bursuck & Damer, 2007).

- **Fluency** and automatic word recognition means that students can decode words and read accurately, at a good pace, and with expressions (NRP, 2001; Ring et al., 2012). Teachers can use echo reading to help with this skill (Carter, 2017).
- **Vocabulary** skills directly connect to comprehension, but it is documented that exceptional students have limited vocabulary knowledge (Leko, Brownell, & Lauterbach, 2010). Students need opportunities to learn, practice and become proficient with words (Carter, 2017).
- **Comprehension** is the understanding of the text (Carter, 2017). Awareness can happen when all aspects of reading take place. Students can benefit from textual enhancement, graphic organizers, story maps, and other features that help develop comprehension (Özmen, 2011; Winke, 2013).
- **Mastery instruction** is when a teacher determines units and goals based on assessing students' performance using formative assessment (Carter, 2017). The evaluation can help the teacher determine what the student learned and what they need to improve (Guskey, 2010).

The above literacy components need to be taught and practiced ensuring that the student is getting a solid foundation of skills to help throughout their lifetime and in a classroom setting. One-to-one instruction can help students with exceptionalities and learning literacy skills. One-to-one teaching can increase instruction time, provide more opportunities for students and teacher interaction, and increase student engagement (Ritchey, 2011).

All the activities listed above require students to be highly engaged (Carter, 2017). Engagement can lead to more participation, leading to improvement as they have more involvement with the material taught.

Progress monitoring is essential for every student, but especially for students with exceptional needs. Carter noted, "Ideally, progress should be monitored regularly in special education and should inform instructional decisions" (Carter, 2017, p.8). Knowing the progress of the student can lead to long-term success. Given the correct progress, information can give the teacher, parent, and school the best steps moving forward to have an education plan in place.

Teachers have the tools and resources to teach literacy to students with exceptionalities effectively in a face-to-face setting. Although there are resources that teachers can use to work in classrooms with their exceptional students, it is essential to note what teachers are using these techniques in their face-to-face classrooms. These strategies now need to be applied to an online learning environment.

In 2011, Ruppap, Dymond, and Gaffney conducted a survey to see what type of instruction was preferred and was seen as successful with students with severe disabilities when it comes to literacy. The study took place in Illinois with sixty-nine notable education directors. The survey consisted of ninety-five questions relating to demographic information, beliefs about literacy instruction, interventions, factors that may affect what is taught, the setting in which literacy is introduced, and barriers to literacy instruction. The survey was an opinion-based assessment to get an idea about the teachers' feelings and education for literacy with students with exceptional needs in a general classroom in face-to-face instruction.

The survey found that "teachers overwhelmingly rated life-skills-linked to literacy skills higher than skills linked to the general education curriculum." (Ruppap, Dymond, & Gaffney, 2011, p. 108). The study confirms that teaching students with exceptional needs in a general

population classroom is possible, but there needs to be a curriculum change. Teachers found a higher success rate in literacy when they used literacy skills in a real-life setting, such as having a conversation or writing an email. Not only does linking it to real-life skills improve exceptional students' comprehension of literacy, but this can help them with life skills in the future, such as previously discussed in this article.

The study emphasizes the success rate seen with students who have tools to help with their communications. The devices used are Augmentative or alternative communication (AAC); they might use gestures, pictures, facial expressions, or assistive technology to communicate. Teachers rated AAC devices being used for word recognition and vocabulary development high when related to the conversation. The teachers use a machine to assist with teaching decoding, and phonological awareness is rated high with this instruction mode. Technology and other resources significantly benefit students who need it (Ruppar, Dymond, and Gaffney, 2011). The study confirms the significance of technology for students with exceptional needs.

All these strategies and tools, real-life skills, and AAC are used in a face-to-face setting. When learning online, there is a change in how instruction is delivered. What is ready to be explored is how these techniques are translated into an online learning environment. In online environments, students are receiving little to no human interaction with their peers and teacher, which is related to improving their literacy skills (talking, facial expressions, hand gestures, etc.). When it comes to communicating with AACs, such as how the student can point to pictures, use gestures, or facial expressions, they now have to use these tools through a screen where this is a

disconnect between the parties involved. The teacher and students rely on these skills to communicate with each other, but now there is a virtual wall blocking them from doing so.

Literacy in an Online Learning Environment for Exceptional Students

Above, I described what literacy learning can look like in a face-to-face setting, now I will look at how this translates to an online learning environment. Online learning needs to be accessible to students—accessibility, meaning available, and usable (Moore & Kaerlsey, 2011). I want to emphasize "usable" in the previous sentence; to use something is to "employ for some purpose; put into service; make use of an item" (retrieved from <https://www.dictionary.com>). The research states that every party using the online learning tool must find it easy to access through a purpose or service, including the teacher and student. Previous research has shown that online learning training and development for teachers is infrequent due to funding, which means that the teacher may not find online learning usable for them as not knowing the proper way to use it for a service, in this case, education. Another method for online learning to be accessible for students and teachers is available for the student and teachers, which is impossible because computers and internet connection are not always reliable, according to the University for Illinois (retrieved from <https://www.uis.edu/ion/resources/tutorials/online-education-overview/strengths-and-weaknesses/>).

With Online Learning becoming a more popular option, especially for students with an exceptionality (Miron, 2016), there needs to be a way to meet their needs in an online learning environment and make it accessible for all parties involved. A study conducted by Rice (2017) found that the difficulty of text in online learning was too difficult for all age ranges. This goes

for students' in the general population, and with exceptional students. Online learning also asks students to study and use vocabulary but gives them little support to practice, notice, or learn the words (Rice & Deshler, 2018). This means students are not receiving the exposure they should to new terms to help build their vocabulary, which is part of literacy development.

When students have access to extra resources, they are not likely to use that extra help (Marteny & Bernadowski, 2016). Students with exceptionalities could benefit from this help since they are behind their general classroom peers. Still, there is no one there making them participate in the extra practice that could benefit them. From this research, it is concluded that students are not benefitting from learning literacy online. In a study conducted by Rice (2018), she looked at how online instruction for literacy is designed and meets exceptional needs. She recorded weekly meetings, message logs, course design documents, and virtual school resources. She specifically looked at how clear the learning objectives were, the personalization of the learning, how they planned for visual and audio presentation. When it came to making the objectives clear to the learner, there was a gap (Rice, 2018). Teachers were more focused on the standards than promoting literacy skills with the students. It would be beneficial to be more explicit with students to clearly understand what they are learning and what is expected of them.

Exceptional students need personalization in their learning. The instructional designer's only way of making these modes of instruction more personalized was by adding more resources (Rice, 2018). From the Marteny and Bernadowski (2016) study, we know that students often do not use these extra resources, and students with exceptionalities are even less likely to use them. So, there is not much room or benefits from "personalization" for online learning.

The designers sought to make the material more appealing by adding visual and audio support. The issue was there was not much support for accessibility with these resources (Rice, 2018). Some did not have captions, alternate text, or even audio, so it did not meet all students' needs since there were deaf/hard of hearing students or blind/visually impaired students.

Online learning is not meeting the needs of all students. There is no way of it being personalized for the need for exceptional students. The only personalization is happening because of the teacher. When it comes to an online course's main design, there is not much a teacher can change due to it being designed for all students either in that state or district by a group of people out of the teacher's reach, typically by experts of online learning design.

Since online learning does not support students with exceptional needs the way it should be, this puts them behind students in face-to-face instruction regarding literacy development due to the little exposure they are receiving. Students with exceptional needs have to be supported in literacy to help develop as well-rounded human beings, and online courses are not meeting those needs.

Methodology

The study set out to explore how a teacher implemented different aspects of literacy development for her exceptional education students in an online learning environment. Additionally, I interviewed the teacher to determine what support she received to prepare for teaching in an online setting. A letter from the UCF Institutional Review Board stated “Based on the information you provided, this study would have been issued an Exempt Category 1 determination...” (see Appendix D).

Context

The school in which I observed is an elementary school in Orlando. The school is in a suburban area, offering multiple resources for exceptional student education. The school has three exceptional education teachers, breaking them up into different grade levels. One is for preschool, one is for kindergarten to second grade, and one is for third to fifth grade. The teacher I observed was the third to fifth-grade exceptional education teacher. The school was chosen because I completed an internship at this location, allowing for easy access to the classroom and teacher when needed along with having a better knowledge on how the school operates as a whole and with their exceptional education program.

The school has multiple steps to determine a student for exceptional student education. The first step is tiering a student. Every student starts at tier-one; if the student is not successful in tier one, they get moved to tier two; if they are still struggling in tier two, they get moved to tier three. If issues are still occurring after tier-three, the student’s learning is evaluated through the school psychologist, with parents’ permission. Once the student is tested for multiple learning disabilities, they assess the best environment for the student. This is based on academics

and behavior. The goal is to keep the student in the general education classroom due to the ESSA legislation with the least restrictive environment. If the exceptional education classroom meets their learning and behavioral needs the best, they will work to place that student in that environment. The process's overall goal is to decide where to place the student and meet them where they are. All the students in the exceptional education classroom, even the ones online, are where they need to be to fulfill their learning goals.

Participant

There was one participant who agreed to be a part of this study. The participant in this study was an exceptional education teacher. As mentioned earlier, she teaches students with exceptionalities in grades third through fifth in a hybrid setting, meaning some students are face-to-face and some are connected learning.

The teacher started her career with going to college for a degree in political science. She then went to work in mutual funds and customer service. She had three kids; when her first child was born, she became a stay-at-home mom for eleven years. When her last child went to kindergarten, she got a paraprofessional job at her children's elementary school. She was a paraprofessional for thirteen years. The first two years were in kindergarten, and the other eleven years were in special education. In the last two years of being a paraprofessional, she got certified through a community college and earned her teaching certification an alternate way, and she is certified in elementary K-6. At the time, her paraprofessional classroom was for only autism spectrum disorder. When the teacher left, she applied for the job, and while waiting, she

got her exceptional student education certification. She then became the teacher for the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) classroom, completing that certificate at the University of Central Florida. The following year they changed the classroom to a V.E. classroom (varying exceptionalities), and she has been there ever since.

This teacher has two students whose parents have chosen for their children to participate in online learning. Both of the students are on an access point; this is a tool used for students with exceptionality. The goal of an access point is to meet the students where they are by putting them at what grade level their abilities are at rather than by age. Even though the students should be in fourth and fifth grade according to age, they are learning lower elementary grade material.

The first student is in fourth grade, but on a third-grade level on the access points. The student in fourth grade has an intellectual disability which, according to the IDEA act, is having below-average general intellectual functioning and deficits in adaptive behavior. The fifth-grade student is also on an access point, currently sitting at the third-grade level on this program. The student is currently categorized as having other health impairments. According to the IDEA act, the student has limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to the environment. These two students went through the multiple-step process described in the context to be placed in this classroom. As determined by the school, teacher, and guardians of these students, they came together and decided that this was the best learning environment for this student.

Data Sources

The data collection process of this study took place in three phases.

Phase I: Semi-structured Interview

The first phase of the study was a pre-observation interview. The interview allowed me to get an idea of what professional development the teacher received for the online learning setting and see what she does to support her students in an online learning environment with literacy development.

On January 25th, 2021, I interviewed the exceptional education teacher. The interview consisted of the same eleven questions that are attached below. The interview was audio-recorded while I was taking notes.

The purpose of the interview was to gather data to answer both research questions. I conducted two interviews. The first interview contained a series of questions related to the professional development provided for the teacher with online learning environments and how the teacher supports literacy development in an online learning environment for students with exceptionalities.

Questions one through six sought to answer research question two, how are schools preparing teachers for an online learning environment with exceptional students? Questions seven through eleven sought to answer research question one, how are students with exceptional needs supported in online learning with literacy development? The questions I asked the exceptional education teacher who participated in the study are listed below.

1. What support are you (the teacher) receiving for online learning?

2. What training did the school or country have you (the teacher) go through to ensure you were prepared to teach in an online setting?
3. Did you feel prepared coming into online learning?
4. Are you (the teacher) still receiving support for online learning throughout the school year?
5. What training do you have wished to receive now that you are in this online learning environment?
6. What do you think your school or county could have done better to ensure the teacher was confident and ready to teach in an online learning environment?
7. What does a typical day in your classroom look like for exceptional education?
8. How does learning this school year (2020-2021) compare to previous years?
9. How are students using online learning being supported with their exceptional needs?
10. How has online learning changed the accommodations needed for students with exceptional needs?
11. What literacy development strategies are you implementing for students using online learning?

The questions were sent to the exceptional education teacher who participated in the study before the interview; this gave her time to think about the answers and collect resources and data if need be. The interview took place face-to-face; it was audio-recorded and transcribed. I asked the exceptional education teacher the questions in order of one through eleven.

After the questions were asked, I performed two observations. After the observations, I conducted a second semi-structured interview, where I asked questions based on the observations made.

Phase II: Observations

For the second part of the study, I observed lessons conducted by the teacher between her and her online students. I had the opportunity to observe a science and writing lesson between the teacher and online students. I took notes while observing the lessons with the online students. I created a t-chart, one side was highlighting what I was looking for in terms of literacy aspects and the other side noted what I observed in regard to literacy skills supported in the online learning environment. This allowed me to focus on what I was looking for, making it clear and simple. The t-chart can be found in Appendix A. I used the research that was conducted in the literature review to help guide how the form was made. I used each component of literacy that is beneficial for students with exceptionalities according to Carter (2017). The form allowed for easy and accessible notetaking to take place during the lessons. It focused on the main areas of literacy development that should be taking place for exceptional students, according to previous research.

I made two observations in the exceptional education classroom, the teacher was instructing both her in person and online students at the same time. I was in the classroom with the teacher while observing the online students. I observed a science and writing lesson during these two observations. The lessons gave opportunities for different literacy instruction to take place.

The purpose of the observations was to see how the instruction of literacy development was being delivered to students with exceptionalities in an online learning environment and how the professional development received by the teacher was being used to help guide instruction. I observed the exceptional education teacher through her online learning environment. The data observed answered the first research question: How is one teacher supporting her exceptional education students with literacy development in an online learning environment?

Phase III: Post-Interview

The last part of the study that was conducted was a post-observation interview. This allowed me to review everything seen during the observation, check-in with the teacher, and ask any questions based on what was discussed in the pre-observation interview and what was seen during the observation.

After observations were made, I compared what was discussed in the interview with what I saw in my observations. From there, I noticed some differences between what was discussed and what was seen. I came up with a series of questions to ask the teacher to see how these things compared and if there was anything I was missing to ensure the correct information is presented.

1. In the interview, you mentioned something called an access point. When observing, I did not see much of this. Can I please get a better understanding of what this is and what it is used for?
2. In the interview, you mentioned tracking their social and behavioral skills. How are you doing this with the online students?

3. In the interview, it was mentioned that you use read aloud, read to teacher, phonics, and context clues for the students. I could not observe most of this, so I was hoping for more detail on these matters and how you use them daily.
4. You mentioned that fluency is very difficult to do in an online learning environment. What steps are you taking to ensure that there is fluency happening to some extent in the online classroom?

Data Analysis

The data created in this study were used to answer the following two research questions.

- How is one teacher supporting her exceptional education students with literacy development in an online learning environment?
- How is the school providing the teacher the professional development she needs in order to educate her exceptional students via an online learning environment?

Analysis of Interview Data

To analyze the data of the interview I first transcribed what the teacher answered to each question. This allowed me to go through and read everything that was discussed to get a deeper understanding of what was said. The first key feature that I was looking for was anything relating to professional development. Going through the transcript of the interview I went through and coded anything relating to professional development. After finding all the information relating to professional development I went back through with a different colored highlighter and coded anything that was said negatively about professional development along with what she believes

could have been improved on. I then went through with a third color and looked for the positive comments made about professional development.

By using the coding, I was able to look closely at anything related to professional development and how that compared to what was found in this study. When analyzing the interview, it gave me the opportunity to collapse the patterns into themes of what was being discussed so I could then use these themes to help guide the structure of the findings.

Analysis of Classroom Observation

After both observations were completed I went back and coded what was observed in both lessons. I first went through and highlighted what was properly and to its fullest potential during the lesson. After I found what was used I went through with other colors and highlighted what was used in the lesson but not in the context that is more beneficial for the students. Once that factor was determined, I highlighted where I saw potential for a literacy component to be used but was not implemented.

Findings

There are five main findings from this research:

1. There was limited professional development for teaching exceptional education students online.
2. Meeting exceptional student educational needs in the online environment was challenging for the teacher.
3. During the teacher's online lesson there were some elements of literacy present such as comprehension and real-world examples.
4. The teacher missed out on some key components for literacy development with exceptional students in an online learning environment.
5. The exceptional students in the online learning environment did not have access to classroom tools which in turn could hinder their learning.

Limited Professional Development for Teaching Exceptional Education Students Online

Through the interview I was able to find that the exceptional education teacher was not provided the professional development needed in order to help her and her students succeed in the online learning environment. The county does not seem to be providing the teacher resources to utilize in the online learning environment to her advantage, which is hindering her students' academic gains. The reasons for receiving little support can be attributed to many different factors within the school and county.

One factor started at the beginning of the school, where the teachers had a two-week planning period. The planning was utilized to use the online learning tools of google classroom and Nearpod, but there was nothing past that extent. According to the interview, the teacher

received professional development on google classroom and Nearpod. The training was on using these tools, though, not so much on how to teach with them.

Another factor was the teacher's schedule. Compared to a general education classroom, the exceptional education teacher did not have time allotted in her plan to attend PLC or professional development courses. According to the interview, “because we have kids all day long, there is never a time where I don’t have students in my classroom, so I can’t attend PLCs as the general education teachers can. I know they offer it; we just don’t have time.” The school did not accommodate the teacher's schedule with her students. Not receiving time to attend professional development workshops lead to her not receiving the support she needed to be in the online learning environment.

The last factor was that the teacher could not utilize the same framework that the general education teachers could. The district provided multiple resources for the teachers to use with online learning to make it easier for the teachers with students online. The exceptional education teacher could not utilize any of these resources due to the circumstances of her classroom. According to the interview, “I don’t use the framework because I teach multi-grade levels, and there is no way I could fit all the framework in for three grade levels, so we’ve been pretty much on our own.” The teacher has been left to use most of her own work and does not have the same resources that general education teachers when it comes to teaching online and having online tools to benefit the teacher and student.

According to research (Coy, 2014), one of the essential aspects for a teacher with online learning is professional development. The teacher made it apparent through the interview that

she cannot utilize the county's professional development and other resources due to the circumstances of her classroom and the children within those four walls.

All these factors contribute to what the analysis of the data states, that many states do not have protocols to meet exceptional student needs in an online learning environment (Greer, Harvey, Burdette, & Basham, 2015). The teacher mentions in the interview that she wishes there was more support for exceptional education with online learning. "I do think they could have reached out more to ESE to make more of an accommodation for us." The county left them to figure out online learning on their own because they are not able to utilize the training and resources that general education classroom teachers are. My data is aligned with the statement that counties seem to be overlooking exceptional education as a whole when it comes to online learning.

Meeting Exceptional Student Education Needs in the Online Learning Environment

The exceptional education teacher had a difficult time with the students learning online and it has been a challenge to reach multiple goals set for them throughout the school year. The teacher mentioned per the interview that teaching online is a difficult task. She noted that it is hard for online students to feel involved with their in-person peers. When looking at the literacy development for students with online learning, the teacher does what she would if they were face-to-face. She uses read-aloud, read to me, phonics, context clues, and fluency. She noted that fluency is challenging to use over the computer, "if they can't hear me, I can't hear them."

The teacher's most daunting task was incorporating other aspects of student development via an online learning environment. The students have academic, social, and behavioral goals they must meet. In the interview, the teacher said, "The independent functioning goals are

difficult to observe via the computer.” Most of the time, the teacher cannot observe the social or behavior goals via the computer because most of the time, these are happening when the teacher is not with them online. This will make it more difficult at the end of the year when the teacher evaluates the student’s growth throughout the academic school year. This supports the idea that students with exceptionalities having support in an online learning environment needs to be more reinforced.

Elements of Literacy Present During Instruction

Throughout the lesson, there were different elements of impactful modes of instruction. There was an emphasis on comprehension and explicit instruction through the two lessons that were observed. Comprehension was very abundant in her instruction. The teacher was very clear in her comprehension skills. She had multiple strategies and support for the students, especially the students who were online. She was checking in on them throughout the lessons. She was supporting what was being taught with worksheets sent home with the students and assisting them with the filling out of these worksheets to ensure that it was accurate, and everyone was on the same page. Outside of the worksheets, she used other skills related to comprehension, such as repetition, breaking down the text and questions, and real-world examples. All these strategies are beneficial to the student's comprehension as it gives them examples and practice with how their thinking should flow when reading, writing and answering questions.

With research conducted by Memis and Bozkurt (2013), they found that many exceptional education teachers found that applying real-world scenarios to instruction was most beneficial for the exceptional education students. This allows for a better understanding of their

learning as they can apply what they know through life and what they are learning. The teacher used real-world examples consistently throughout both her lessons. When it came to looking at the text in science, she applied examples of what the students would use in their daily life such as cake mixtures, making a milkshake, and more. All things that the students could easily apply to something they have done before. During writing instruction, the students were writing about a topic they could relate to. This strategy gave them more material to work and write with as they had a better knowledge of the topic due to it being something they use in their daily lives.

Exceptional Students in Online Space Needed More Support While Engaging in Literacy Practices

I did not observe accommodations for the students in the online setting when it came to meeting their literacy goals. The teacher did incorporate literacy elements throughout her lessons; however, each element could have been more supported. For example, phonemic awareness was present, but not fully supported. According to Carter (2017), phonemic awareness is “the ability to perceive the sound units of words.” When observing the science and writing lesson, the teacher did not apply these skills. When a student struggled to spell a word, she spelled it out for them, missing the opportunity for the students to practice the letters’ different sounds. By spelling the word, it seemed she was focused on getting them through the lesson and missing the opportunity to help them develop a literacy skill that could help them in the long term. Students with disabilities have shown to have low phonemic awareness abilities (Torgesen et al., 2001; de Groot, van den Bos, van der Meulen, & Minnaert, 2015; de Groot, van den Bos,

Minnaert, & van der Meulen, 2014), thus, the teacher might have used this time to develop that phonemic awareness.

The next area of literacy I observed was phonics; this was similar to phonemic awareness. Phonics is the ability to understand the sound and how it is represented by a letter. Phonics is breaking down a word even more (Bursuck & Damer, 2007). Again, when looking at phonics, more support was needed. The students did not work with the letter sounds, rather they learned letters by what they were as they copied them.

The next area I observed was fluency. When looking at this topic, the teacher mentioned that fluency is a difficult task to complete in an online setting. When using technology, it can easily cut out, lag, or more. All these factors can lead to fluency not being taught the same way as it would be in a face-to-face setting. When observing the two lessons, I did not observe any fluency instruction. The teacher read from a PowerPoint slide at a standard rate with minimal expression. When it came time for the children to read, they read slowly with not much expression. Using expression might have been encouraged throughout the lesson. However, it cannot be easy to communicate those tones and expressions via an online setting as there are so many factors involved.

The last element of literacy that I did not observe in the lessons was vocabulary. Vocabulary can be connected to comprehension, so vocabulary use must be used throughout all subjects and emphasized (Leko, Brownell, & Lauterbach, 2010). While observing the science lesson, there were multiple opportunities to use vocabulary. The teacher was teaching about different mixtures (heterogeneous, homogenous, mixture, etc.). All of these words can be considered vocabulary in the subject area of science. Throughout the lesson, she did not review

what they were to the extent that could have been to reinforce those vocabulary strategies. It is vital that students with exceptionalities have the opportunity to learn, practice, and become proficient with words (Carter, 2017). Practice and exposure opportunities were missing within this lesson.

Exceptional Students in Online Learning Did Not Have Access to Classroom Tools

The students online missed out on a classroom environment that has extra support for them. They did not have access to having posters around the room which lead to more exposure of different learning strategies and helpful hints.

One of the main factors that the students are missing out on is being in a classroom setting with exposure to classroom tools and resources. According to Moore and Kearsley (2011), one thing that students who are online need is accessibility. The students in the online environment are not receiving access to classroom tools that the face-to-face students have. The face-to-face students have access to classroom tools such as a vocabulary wall, spelling wall, anchor charts, multiple school supplies, ability to communicate with peers and teachers easily, etc. The students who were learning online had limited access to all the classroom tools that were present in the classroom setting.

Another thing to note is that technology has its faults. The teacher emphasized that technology is great *when it works*. Meaning that technology is always not working. During both lessons I saw multiple times when the computer would lag or fall behind. This can lead to miscommunication between the teacher and student, causing them to fall behind their face-to-face peers.

Discussion

Overall, there are modes of instruction that need to occur for progress and growth to be seen with the students (Carter, 2017). These findings showed the teacher engaged in explicit instruction. This is in line with research, however, she only made use of one mode of explicit instruction. The teacher relied mostly on modeling while students worked independently and copied what the teacher was doing. Although explicit instruction is essential, the other three modes, progression of essential reading skills, one-to-one individualized instruction, and progress monitoring (Carter, 2017), could have been weaved into explicit instruction to support student academic achievement. Without using the other modes and not using explicit instruction to its fullest potential, it was hard to tell the extent to which the observed instruction resulted in student learning.

Additionally, there was an emphasis on state testing throughout the duration of both lessons. According to Rice (2018), this is not beneficial for the student to make academic gains. The students are receiving instruction to help them pass a state test, with little emphasis on skills that need to be developed. State testing has a focus on comprehension and real-world skills which is important for students, but it also means they are missing on the other key factors of literacy development such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. All these skills work together to enrich the students' learning and can also be seen on state testing but the teacher in this classroom emphasized the “more important” of the skills, comprehension and real world.

Outside of what was seen through instruction there are other key factors that can take place in order for the student to be in an environment that can help them learn and grow. The students have social and behavioral goals to meet. These skills are an essential foundation for the students to learn. According to Thompson, Ferdig & Black (2012), lowering these risks and maintaining them at home can make instruction easier. Although it does make instruction “easier” it makes it more difficult for the teacher to observe these goals and ensure that progress is being made. The teacher noted in the semi-structured interview that these goals were hard to observe, “Their independent functioning goals are difficult to observe via the computer because when they are independent, they usually aren’t online.”

Along with independent functioning goals being difficult to observe, the teacher also relies heavily on parent communication. The family has to help with these goals and take on the role of “learning coach” (Coy, 2014). The teacher mentioned multiple times through the post interview how closely she has to work with the parents in order to ensure that the students’ goals are being met. I want to note how challenging this is for the specific teacher because one of her online students has parents who cannot read English, adding another challenging factor to the communication.

Professional development needs to be looking at ways to take what is used in person and move that into an online setting. Professional development for teachers is the first step, but they must also look at how they are meeting the needs of the families within the online learning environment.

When going through the pre- and post-interview answers it is made clear that a lot of adapting and flexibility have had to come from the teacher and students in order to make the online learning work. The county can prepare for this in the future to ensure that there is a smooth transition with these for future students. In order to do so they could work closely with the exceptional education teachers to get their feedback on what works and doesn't to plan instruction and professional development around those topics.

Conclusion

This study asked two main research questions.

- How is one teacher supporting her exceptional education students with literacy development in an online learning environment?
- How is the school providing the teacher the professional development she needs in order to educate her exceptional students via an online learning environment?

The learning of the classroom always starts with the teacher. If the teacher is not supported, the teacher cannot be expected to support their students. Throughout the interview with the exceptional education teacher, there was a common theme throughout her answers. She did not feel supported in her efforts to teach in the online learning environment with exceptional students. She mentions, "I do think they could have reached out more to ESE to make more of an accommodation." Between her schedule and having a small population of students compared to the rest of the school, she did not receive the support needed to help her and her students thrive in the online learning environment.

When it comes to supporting students with exceptionalities in an online learning environment, studies have shown that most states do not even have protocols lined up to meet the needs of exceptional student education (Greer, Harvey, Burdette, and Basham conducted a

survey, 2015) and the online students are performing lower online than face to face (Thompson, Ferdig, and Black, 2012).

For literacy development with exceptional education students, it has been made clear through research that students need extra support in this area. One thing that works best for them is explicit instruction, progression through the essential reading skills, one-to-one individualized instruction, and progress monitoring (Carter, 2017). Along with the extra support, the students can also benefit from real-world scenarios, which they can relate to in their daily lives to have a deeper understanding of that topic as they have experience with it (Ruppar, Dymond, & Gaffney, 2011).

Combining all these with what was observed in the exceptional education classroom, there is a gap between these topics and how they can transition from one another. The teacher in this exceptional education classroom was doing what she knows to do in an in person setting, but doing so in a way that may not be received as the most beneficial for her students. She focused mainly on explicit instructions, real-world examples, and comprehension but with little emphasis on literacy, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary.

With some issues concerning online learning it is easy to look at that negatively but through the research and observations there are some positive takeaways from online learning that can be included and used to adapt in the future of education. One being that the students are in an environment where they are more comfortable so it allows for better behavior management to take place, meaning that this behavior will not disrupt the students learning or those around them. The second positive is that there is more flexibility when learning so students are able to

learn from wherever and for the most part whenever. This means if the student is sick, traveling, or missing some school there is access for them to use school whenever need be so they are not missing all the material.

Moving forward, the state and county can take more action to ensure that their teachers feel confident and prepared to teach in an online setting. With this becoming a new way of learning for many people, there needs to be more research and protocols to ensure that the students are receiving the education needed to be successful in their academic careers.

The learning starts with the teacher. If the teacher does not feel confident and ready to take on the role as an online educator, the county and state can be doing more to ensure that the teacher's confidence is present. The exceptional education teacher specifically at this school is not receiving professional development due to her schedule. The school and county should be working on her schedule to ensure that there is time for this professional development. These professional developments could lead to feeling more confident in the online setting and helping with literacy development skills.

Once the teacher feels more confident with the online learning environment, she can then focus on the classroom types in the classroom. Using the tools presented in professional development, she can apply those with her students to help the students' learning grow.

There is a gap with the county and online learning for exceptional student education that needs to be closed, and there are multiple ways to fix this gap. It is up to the schools, county, and state to work closely and diligently to ensure that this gap is closing to then, in turn, benefit the teacher and students inside these exceptional education classrooms.

Appendix A.

Observation Notes Format

Literacy Components	Notes
Phonemic awareness	
Phonics	
Fluency	
Vocabulary	
Comprehension	
Other	

Appendix B.

Pre-Observation Interview Questions

1. What support are you (the teacher) receiving for online learning?

We at the beginning of the year received two weeks of pre planning to help us get prepared for what we needed to do. We were given the platform, which is google meets to use and also through google classroom. We are not allowed to use anything else besides that. But besides that, ESE teachers were not given a lot vs the gen ed teachers have time to go to PLC, more training, they go by the framework. I don't use the framework because I teach multi-grade levels and there is no way I could fit the framework in for three grade levels, so we've been pretty much on our own.

2. What training did the school or country have you (the teacher) go through to ensure you were prepared to teach in an online setting?

During the preplanning weeks we did have a PD (professional development) on how to use google classroom, how to use different aspects to include different sorts of lessons.

We were also certified in Nearpod so we can use and incorporate those into our classroom. Nearpod is like a slideshow presentation that you can add your voice, games, surveys into and things you can do with that, that you can't do with google classroom.

3. Did you feel prepared coming into online learning?

Yes, only because we did have a taste of it in distance learning (this took place from March 2020-May 2020 when COVID-19 first became a major issue across America). I did personally myself, but I think gen ed had the advantage over that as well.

4. Are you (the teacher) still receiving support for online learning throughout the school year?

No, we don't have the time to attend a PLC because we have kids all day long. There is never a time where I don't have students in my classroom so I can't attend PLC's like the gen ed teachers can. I know they offer it; we just don't have time.

5. What training do you have wished to receive now that you are in this online learning environment?

I do think they could have reached out more to ESE to make more of an accommodation for us. We have pretty much taught ourselves with what we know works for us and works for kids. I don't feel that I need it now at this point but in the beginning I do wish they were there more.

6. What do you think your school or county could have done better to ensure the teacher was confident and ready to teach in an online learning environment?

They scrambled, they gave us those two weeks and took all our teacher work days away. Scrambled to get us ready. I can't expect them to do anymore than they did because nobody knew what was going to happen, nobody knew what was going to be going on and here it is January of 2021. So, I can't expect them to have helped us over the

summer. Everything was closed, they couldn't reach out to do anything online, I can't fault them there.

7. What does a typical day in your classroom look like for exceptional education?

Everybody gets online at 8:40, I take attendance, we have our morning meeting. We touch on social skills and I let them know what the morning is going to look like. Because I have multiple grade levels I have different times per grade, per group. It is not necessarily grouped by grades but by colors. Because I have half the class on access point and have the class on gen ed curriculum. So, I have four groups and they all have a scheduled time that is sent out to them. All have different times that we meet to do our small group instruction and help with the assignment that goes with that small group time. The students log off and they have independent work which has been a packet that parents pick up on Mondays of every week and in return they bring me there completed work. They get ELA in the morning, all four groups. They have specials, they have lunch, they recess. The kids online obviously have a break, whether they choose to go outside and play, whether they choose to have lunch at that time, it's up to them. But there is a good span that they have to monitor themselves. Parents do a good job of monitoring for them. They have assignments in google classroom I have assigned. They have independent work that is paper pencil and then work with me. We then do the math block in the afternoon. The same goes for the afternoon. They meet with me for a designated time, we do the lesson, we do their practice, and then they have independent work as well. They also have iready for math and reading.

8. How does learning this school year (2020-2021) compare to previous years?

It's so hard. My ESE kids don't work a lot in groups, but we do pairs. They talk with their mask on across the aisle. There is no sitting on the floor this year. As far as online kids it's difficult for them to feel involved. More than a couple thought that they were only in school when they were online with me which is as you see, twenty-five minutes in the morning and twenty-five minutes in the afternoon and then for the group is twenty minutes. That's the only time they thought they were in school, so they didn't do anything independently. Like "hey, school work is throughout the day!" multiple times I would send to parents what their day looks like, this is what they should be doing from this time to this time. If they don't have the support at home, it wasn't beneficial.

9. How are students using online learning being supported with their exceptional needs?

The two kids who are still at home are at the access point. So, they are not being taught at their grade level, they are being taught at their ability level. For every assignment if they don't get a seventy percent they have a chance to fix it. Then I average the two scores as for my gen ed kids only get that on a test and quiz. But they get that advantage on every assignment. It is kind of difficult to do online. Especially with quizzes and tests, those stay online, and I grade them as soon as they are done so that they can do fixes. With assignments that they do independently, they put it in a packet that comes back to me the following Monday. Well, if they have to do fixes, it's a mute point. I can't send it back to them, wait another week for it when they have already forgotten what they

learned the week before. So, that's given to them, but it can't be used well with online learning.

I have had two come back that really needed to come back, so it has been a lot easier. They get more work done here than they have ever gotten at home and one student had his fifth-grade brother doing his work for him, his iredady came out as a fifth grader when he couldn't read so...

10. How has online learning changed the accommodations needed for students with exceptional needs?

Their independent functioning goals are difficult to observe via the computer because when they do independent they usually aren't online. Although, you know the one's that independently don't do anything, I can obviously see, there is a breakdown in communication. If they had social goals that's hard to do via the computer. I put them on the whiteboard so they can interact with their classmates, but it is not the same thing. Even my in-class kids, they would get gen ed minutes that count towards recess, well, they are not really out there with their gen ed peers. I mean they are out there but separated. So, that has been difficult.

As far as academic goals, there are goals there that I can do.

Behavioral goals I don't really get to see unless I talk to parents, which I do on occasion as well. They don't have the distractions they have at home that they would have in class. So, they don't have any negative peer interactions, if they do have a meltdown I am not seeing it because they are not online with me at the time.

11. What literacy development strategies are you implementing for students using online learning?

We have a social skills program that we follow as well. It is called Sanford harmony, it is third grade across the board even though I have third, fourth, and fifth grade because it's easily understood.

As far as literacy we read aloud, they read to me. I mean the same thing we do in the classroom we have been able to do online. As far as strategies with phonics we break apart the word, we infer. Context clues, we read the sentence and look back for clues. The same thing we do online.

It is really hard to get fluency via the computer, if they can't hear me, I can't hear them. You know, technology is good when it works.

They will write and for every time I need to edit, they will write their sloppy copy. The parents will take a picture and either text or email it to me. We will go over it together. It is just more time consuming because it is not right there, they can't just come to my table. We do the same thing; it just looks different. Parents take a lot of pictures, a lot of texting, a lot of emailing.

Same thing we do with the spelling test, I was not sure at the beginning of the year how we were going to work it, but it worked out nicely.

Appendix C.

Post-Observation Interview Questions

1. In the interview, you mentioned something called an access point. When observing, I did not see much of this. Can I please get a better understanding of what this is and what it is used for?

- Curriculum
- Decreased cognitive ability
- Teach to ability

Access points curriculum is designed to be differentiated for our children that meet the criteria. They have to have a decreased cognitive ability. Parents have to agree to it, they have to sign permission each year. But access points I can teach to their ability level rather than their grade level.

2. In the interview, you mentioned tracking their social and behavioral skills. How are you doing with the online students?

- None online with social goals
- Behavioral goals either seen online or communicated by parents

Thankfully my students at home do not have any behavioral goals, They do have functioning goals and they are being to demonstrate on task behaviors. What I can't see on the screen I get feedback from parents.

3. In the interview, it was mentioned that you use read aloud, read to teacher, phonics, and context clues for the students. I could not observe most of this, so I was hoping for more detail on these matters and how you use them daily.

Phonics I do reading street curriculum, I do not follow the framework as they do in gen ed. Up through third grade they have phonic skills included in their instruction. For my upper grades, fourth and fifth, I provide that with worksheets that they do go over. Any case-by-case basis that comes and is struggling with I'll just fill that in, teachable moments.

They read to me, their story, it's kind of hard- more difficult online to point out words or what have you. But we have gotten to where we can do that pretty easily.

They read to me, I read to them. I do have fluency checks, not as often as I did when they were all face to face, but we do have quarterly fluency checks.

4. You mentioned that fluency is very difficult to do in an online learning environment. What steps are you taking to ensure that there is fluency happening to some extent in the online classroom?

With their read-aloud to me. I encourage them to practice with parents. I do have a difficult situation with one student, her parents do not read Spanish or English so when she reads to them it is difficult because they do not know if what she says is right or

wrong. She can't get help with them. It would be beneficial for her to be in school face-to-face, but parents are not on board with that.

Appendix D.



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board

PWA00000351
IRB00001138, IRB00012110
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

Memorandum

To: Alyson Hepler
From: UCF Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Date: April 21, 2021
Re: Request for IRB Determination

The IRB reviewed the information related to your thesis *Students with Exceptionalities Learning Literacy in an Online Learning Environment*.

As you know, the IRB cannot provide an official determination letter for your research because it was not submitted into our electronic submission system.

However, if you had completed a Huron submission, the IRB could make one of the following research determinations: "Not Human Subjects Research," "Exempt," "Expedited" or "Full Board".

Based on the information you provided, this study would have been issued an Exempt Category 1 determination outcome letter had a request for a formal determination been completed to the UCF IRB through Huron IRB system.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB irb@ucf.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Katie Kilgore".

Katie Kilgore
IRB Specialist

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