

FEATURE ARTICLE

By Lexie Ruscheinski, M.S.

When the COVID-19/Coronavirus pandemic first came onto the scene in the U.S. in March 2020, every industry had been affected in some way, but the education and school systems were hit especially hard with a plethora of obstacles and hardships. From online learning, to accommodating technology and educational needs of students, to teacher and faculty burnout, it has been a year of learning, flexibility, and growth in the field of education.

As of April 2020, schools had closed in 180 countries and 85% of students worldwide were out of school (World Bank Group, 2020). Educators and administrators alike had to adapt and adjust their instructional approaches (Daniel, 2020). In a study conducted by Collie (2021), teachers reported that their most prominent stressors related to how the pandemic had affected their jobs as educators were somatic burden and emotional exhaustion.

School closures and other related difficulties that came with the COVID-19 pandemic affected all students in many ways, but there were especially challenges for students with identified disabilities who were on Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Students with disabilities experienced a reduction of the time and quality of services they received from providers including, but not limited to physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech and language providers



Surviving and Thriving: Supporting Students with LD During the 2020 School Year

(Grant, 2020). Despite requirements for schools to continue to provide services outlined in student's IEPs, there were many challenges to providing these services remotely or in a safe manner. In a survey from the nonprofit organization, ParentsTogether, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, 20% of parents whose child had an IEP said they were receiving services, while 39% were not receiving any support at all (ParentsTogether, 2020). Compared to their grade level peers, families of children with IEPs had fewer learning opportunities

and were twice as likely to report distance learning was going poorly.

Three education professionals from a large, urban school district in the Midwest share their challenges and successes supporting students with disabilities throughout the pandemic and how they plan to move forward this new school year.

Amy Dorn and Alexandra Hinman are intervention specialists at Amanda Elementary School in Middletown, Ohio, one of the largest elementary schools in the district.

In what modalities have you taught this year?

Amy: This year I have taught virtually, in a hybrid model, as well as in person.

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Alex: For the 2020-2021 school year, I have taught in a variety of modalities. At the beginning of the school year, students who were placed within specialized units were able to come in person for two days a week. The rest of the week was considered remote instruction. During these remote days, I would have hour-long Zoom sessions with each student, and then all students were able to join for an hour at the end of the day as a whole group. For a majority of the year, I was teaching both in person and online. After some time, the district then moved to a hybrid schedule which allowed unit students to have in person learning four days a week and one remote day. After our spring break in March, Middletown then moved back to full time in person learning.

What strategies have you found successful for providing special education services to students with learning disabilities in face-to-face and virtual spaces?

Amy: We were fortunate enough to have time prior to the school year beginning to give input, along with the general education teachers, supplies that we would find necessary for the students to have at home so that we could work with the students. Once I saw what the students were going to be given in at home supply kits, I was able to develop lessons that would meet the needs of the students' individualized education goals. The challenges that came to light in working face-to-face were the inability to work in small groups in the same manner. Also, the students were unable to see my mouth, which complicated mimicking letter sounds.

Alex: I found that working one on one during remote learning proved to be the easiest and most efficient for my students. At the beginning of the school year, it was difficult to create a schedule that worked with the students and their parents due to work schedules. Working one on one with students remotely allowed me to really focus on their needs, IEP goals, and general education curriculum. Another strategy that helped was pre-recording lessons. There were some students who were not able to log in to our Zooms due to various reasons, so I began recording lessons and posting them so that the students could still have access to instruction. However, when the students were in person, the best strategies were the use of rotations/centers for each subject area and a consistent routine.

What strategies have you found successful in engaging families from diverse backgrounds in face-to-face and virtual spaces?

Alex: Throughout this school year, our school has done a lot of fun and engaging activities for the students and their families to participate in. For my students and their families, each afternoon that we were remote, we had what we called "family bonding". At the last hour of the school day, our class would log into Zoom for a whole group session of just chatting and catching up with each other. The most efficient strategy in engaging our families from diverse backgrounds was open communication and creating events for everyone to interact. In the past we would have in person PAC nights, but this year we moved those events to Zoom.

What have you done to prepare for fall? In what modality are you teaching?

Amy: I am preparing to work face-to-face in the fall.

Alex: Middletown teachers prepared for both online and face-to-face instruction. However, online instruction is only offered to the secondary levels and not elementary. I planned for face-to-face instruction for the upcoming school year.

What tips do you have for other professionals, based on your experience?

Amy: During remote or virtual learning and hybrid, the students were excited to see each other, so we added time into our small group to have social time. This proved to be an incentive for attending a ZOOM session. Also, posting Storyline Online segments or other read alouds in my google classroom was a great way to involve family. I would post stories that were read by a favorite celebrity or of a story we recently had in our small groups. One student was very pleased to share the videos with younger siblings. During face-to-face instruction, I created individual supply canisters for each student to use in my classroom instead of community supplies, like a shared crayon bin. I used only the manipulatives that were easy to clean.

Alex: Based on this past year, the biggest advice would be to be flexible! It is important to have your schedule and to be consistent, but things change all the time. I personally made about 14 different schedules for our

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class because of how often things would change. The second piece of advice would be to be patient and have empathy. These students and families have been through so much, it is important to remember that we are not the only ones in these uncharted waters.

Beth Hendricks is the principal at Amanda Elementary School.

What tools and strategies have you used to support your special education teachers this year?

Beth: We have used a considerable amount of resources this year with all the different models of learning. In late March of last year we were totally remote and sent home packets for students and communicated with parents with Zoom and Dojo. As we transitioned to school this fall, all students were given computers. Teachers and students did work via Zoom and Google Classroom.

What school-level supports and strategies have you found successful in engaging families in supporting their child (e.g., sending home materials, internet access, etc.)?

Beth: When students returned in October [2020], they were in school four days a week. We continued with small group instruction and supported our students with lots of SEL [social emotional learning] time to increase our relationship with them and their families. Our district provides a school liaison for our families who are able to access community resources, such as food, clothing, rent and counseling.

What were some of the challenges you faced with staying compliant with IEPs and providing special education services and how did you overcome those challenges?

Beth: The most challenging issue with IEP's this year has been meeting the minutes in a remote setting. With internet issues, both hardware and software students were not able to attend on time and with regularity. Doing Zoom IEP/ETR meetings was a big learning curve for everyone. We often would bring families in one at a time and do computer tutorials.

What tips do you have for other administrators, based on your experience?

Beth: My first tip would be to remember to ask for and

give GRACE. This has been as incredibly difficult experience for everyone involved. From teachers who have planned great lessons for students to have no one log on, parents and students who are on the phone trying to find a Zoom link or their Google classroom, hotspots that have exceeded their data plans and students who just want to be in school. Helping everyone in my building feel safe, valued, and loved has been my greatest lesson learned this year.

According to the National Education Association, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every area of public education and put a spotlight on the strengths and challenges of our schools (NEA Today, 2021). Many teachers over this summer break were busy reflecting and applying lessons they have learned this past year as they plan for the future. Educators have been students' biggest advocates from delivering meals to creating accessible learning opportunities. The teachers we spoke with are optimistic about the future of education, teaching, and being able to remain in the classroom for face-to-face learning.

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About the Author

Lexie Ruscheinski, M.S.

Lexie is a School Psychologist Intern for Milford Exempted Village School District in Milford, OH. Lexie is a graduate student currently wrapping up her final year in the School Psychology program at Miami University in Oxford, OH where she is finalizing her thesis on *Student Perspectives on the Inclusive Mathematics Classroom with Co-Teachers* and will graduate with her Education Specialist portion of her degree in May of 2022. Lexie received her Bachelor's degree in Child, Adult, and Family Services with an emphasis in

Child Development/Child Study from Iowa State University in May of 2019. Current research interests for Lexie include inclusive/special education, behavioral interventions, autism spectrum disorders, and early childhood education. Before pursuing School Psychology, Lexie had always had a passion for working with children with and without disabilities in multiple capacities including working as a Behavioral Skills Therapist, Job Coach, Assistant Teacher, and Research Assistant. 🍷

PRESIDENTIAL UPDATE

Dear Members,

As we transition into the heat of summer, I have one important update that I would like to provide. I am happy to report that we have a new incoming editor of *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice* (LDRP). Dr. David Scanlon has agreed to assume Editorship of LDRP once the term of Dr. Linda Mason ends at the end of the 2021 calendar year.

As I am sure all our members would agree, we were so very fortunate to have LDRP in the capable hands of Dr. Mason for the last six years. Under her leadership, the journal expanded its already strong reputation as a leading source for learning disability research and practitioner articles. According to traditional metrics, such as journal impact factor, LDRP is consistently in the top 20 journals in the broad field of special education, rising all the way up to number 7 for the 2018 citation year.

While our impact factor allows for some type of quantification that we and Dr. Mason should be proud of, it fails to fully encapsulate the value of LDRP to DLD members and the broader fields of learning disabilities and special education. I led the editorial search back in 2015 that concluded with the hiring of Dr. Mason, and so I took this opportunity to go back and look through her application material (hope that's OK, Linda). What I found did not surprise me at all. She accomplished what she set out to do.

One important goal that Dr. Mason proposed in her application material was to devote more journal pages to the 'P' (practice) in LDRP. Throughout her tenure, she did



exactly that with a consistent push to ensure that our journal translated research to practice. A quick scan of volume 36 issue 1 demonstrates she successfully attained this goal with two practice articles published, one on culturally sustaining practices in content areas (Freeman-Green et al., 2021) and one on the importance of treatment fidelity for practitioners (Sanetti et al., 2021). I am so incredibly grateful for Dr. Mason's exceedingly competent stewardship of LDRP over the past six years. She certainly made me and the search committee proud! I hope the next time you see her, you take the opportunity to thank her for a job well done.

While I am sad to see Dr. Mason go, I am confident that Dr. Scanlon has the drive and vision to ensure LDRP continues to be an important resource to our members. Dr. Scanlon has served as a journal editor before, and he has extensive leadership and research experience in the learning disabilities field. Just like Dr. Mason, Dr. Scanlon has set out an ambitious agenda for his editorial term. Among his many goals, Dr. Scanlon has plans to increase international article submissions, publish scholarly commentaries, encourage authors to implement open science research practices, and focus on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. I, and the rest of the DLD board, are ready to support his efforts and provide him with the resources he needs to attain his goals and continue LDRP's excellent reputation as a leading learning disabilities journal.

Thank you for your continued support of DLD.

Bill Therrien
DLD President

Dear Members,

I am happy to provide a few exciting updates since our last newsletter.

LDRP Editor

As you will have read in the President's Message, 2021 is the last year of Dr. Linda Mason's service as editor of *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice* (LDRP). We thank Dr. Mason for her incredible stewardship of the journal. We are excited to welcome Dr. David Scanlon as journal editor beginning January, 2022. We look forward to watching the journal grow under Dr. Scanlon's leadership.

**Publishing with LDRP**

Did you know that LDRP reaches more than 6,600 institutions worldwide? In 2020, LDRP full-text articles were downloaded nearly 120,000 times. The top three downloaded articles were accessed over 1,000 times each via download from Wiley, Google Scholar, or other platforms. LDRP editors have kept mean submission-to-first-decision times to an average of 6 weeks or less over the past five years. Once your article is accepted and proofs are received by Wiley, your article is available online in fewer than 14 days. As of January 2021, page limits on articles and in issues have been relaxed, which means more room for you to include the most important details in your articles. This also means more room to include high-quality articles in every LDRP issue.

When you publish with LDRP, your work is promoted via social media by Wiley and by DLD's new Digital Media Committee, is eligible to receive the honorable Kirk Award in research or practice, and is first-in-line to be highlighted in DLD's PD in 3 series at teachingld.org. Most importantly, your research in LDRP is accessed by thousands of researchers and practitioners world-wide.

Submit your work today at

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/15405826>

Kirk Awards and Open Access

Awarding excellent research and scholarship is the best part of the Publication and Communication committee work. We are happy to share that as of January 2020, articles selected as Kirk Award winners will be freely available for download by anyone for three years, after which the articles return to subscription and pay-per-article access only. This means that for a limited time, researchers, practitioners, and

the general public can search for and download the award-winning articles for free, without hassle.

The first Kirk Award winners to enjoy this fantastic benefit include Dr. Jean Schumaker (research winner) and Lizzie Thomas (practice winner), for their articles:

Schumaker, J.B., Fisher, J.B., Walsh, L.D. and Lancaster, P.E. (2020), Effects of Multimedia versus Live Professional Development on Teachers' and Students' Performance Related to the Question Exploration Routine. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 35: 180-200. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.12232>

Thomas, E.R., Conoyer, S.J. and Lembke, E.S. (2020), Districtwide Evaluation of RTI Implementation: Success, Challenges, and Self-Efficacy. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 35: 118-125. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.1222>

When you click on the doi link, you will notice the "free access" symbol—yay! Please share these fantastic articles with anyone who you believe will benefit!

NewTimes for DLD: Thank you to the Editor, Dr. Freeman-Green

For the final update, I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the Editor of this newsletter, Dr. Shaqwana Freeman-Green. Dr. Freeman-Green served as co-Editor of *NewTimes* from 2016 to 2019, and as Editor from 2019 through 2021. She served as a member of the Publications and Communications for many years prior to her role as co-editor.

As Editor, Dr. Freeman-Green has continued the tradition of *NewTimes* to provide members with timely research briefs and the most recent and important DLD news. She strengthened the newsletter by bringing back the Policy Updates and by highlighting DLD member accomplishments. Finally, and importantly, she underscored DLD's commitment to culturally and linguistically relevant practices and DLD's stance against racism, hatred, and injustice in all environments in her early 2020 Editor's Message. On behalf of the Publications and Communications Committee and DLD Members, I'd like to thank Dr. Freeman-Green for her leadership and service.

Dr. Abby Allen (Clemson) is the current Co-Editor of *NewTimes for DLD* and will take over as editor beginning 2022.

Sincerely,

Kristen D. Beach

Chair of the Publications and Communications Committee

DLD Digital Media Committee

We are excited to report that DLD has recently created an ad-hoc committee called the “*Digital Media*” Committee. Kelly Grillo and Stephen Ciullo co-chair this committee. A goal of DLD over the past five years has been to engage DLD members online and to provide useful content to educators outside of DLD. Thus, the Digital Media committee is now sharing many of DLD’s exciting resources (and announcements) with our members in a timelier fashion via social media.

In the short term, this committee will continue to increase DLD’s presence on social media sites, such as Twitter, to share key announcements such as nominations for awards, resources for teachers, new and interesting articles published in LDRP, and other information relevant to the CEC community. In the long-term, the committee will develop a digital media infrastructure that can be expanded as technological capabilities increase. For instance, Kelly Grillo is leading an Ambassador program titled “DLD Social Media Leadership

Intern Ambassadors” (email Kelly at kjgrillo@gmail.com if you are interested). The Intern Ambassadors will help share DLD’s resources via social media, and engage in long-term planning with the committee to develop more innovative ways to use digital media in the future to provide value to members of DLD.

Although the Digital Media Committee is new, its efforts have begun to make an impact. There has been a considerable increase in content shared via DLD’s Twitter account (@TeachingLD). Social media metric data (e.g., impressions, media reach) have also increased each month. In essence, DLD and the Digital Media Committee are enthusiastic about sharing more of DLD’s terrific content, announcements, and member highlights with our members, as well as others in the CEC and special education community. Please contact Kelly (kjgrillo@gmail.com) or Stephen (ciullo@txstate.edu) if you are interested in the Ambassadors program or possibly joining this committee.



Each year at the **CEC Convention & Expo**, thousands of special education professionals from around the world come together to learn, share, grow, and connect. With hundreds of sessions on just about every topic in the field, the CEC Convention & Expo is THE professional development event for special educators to find research, tips, and strategies you can actually apply to supporting students with disabilities and/or gifts and talents.

Check back later for updates and registration information.

Subdivision Contact Info

Several jurisdictions have active DLD subdivisions. Many of these organizations have conferences and other activities for teachers. All subdivisions can provide more information about learning disabilities at the state, province, or local level. Please contact the representatives listed below for more information. If you are a DLD member and are interested in forming a subdivision in your state, contact DLD's Membership chair.

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