

# SPECIAL EDUCATION

## *in Unusual Times*



Photo provided by Jessica Pino

Earlier this year, for Jessica Pino '15, M.S. '16, the best part of her day was the 30 minutes every morning when she saw all eight of her preschool students. She greeted the children, and then read them a story, showed a video, sung a song or gave one-step directions (a skill they were all working on). This might seem like a normal way to begin the school day. Except for the fact that the entire meeting happened over a video call.

Like every other school in New York State, the Fred S. Keller School — the preschool in Yonkers, NY where Pino teaches — closed its doors in March due to COVID-19. Instead of spending full days with her students, Pino would see them on screen for 30 minutes per day. She spent the rest of her time supporting her students' parents by meeting individually with each family, creating and sharing instructional materials and answering parents' questions throughout the day.

Pino is the head teacher in an 8:1:2 classroom, which means there are eight students, one teacher, and two assistant teachers. Her students are children with disabilities who are considered pre-listener or pre-speaker, which means they have difficulty following directions independently and are predominantly non-vocal. Students in this type of classroom setting are typically working on skills such as responding or looking when hearing their names called, making eye contact, following simple one-step directions such as "come here" or "clap your hands," as well as learning to emit vocalizations and some forms of functional communication.

As head teacher, it is Pino's responsibility to review each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), develop an instructional "program" to meet his or her annual goals and assess progress across the school year. She explains that much of the teachers' work in the classroom aims to build on students' existing listening or speaking skills to help them attend and respond to the teachers' voices or faces. "We give a direction and then wait one to two seconds to let the student process what we're asking," she explained. "If they don't follow the direction, we model again. If that doesn't work, we may have to provide a physical prompt, so, for example, clapping their hands for them if that's what we've asked them to do or holding their hand to lead them to the table."

However, this work looks much different given that Pino's only interactions with her students was through computer screens. Parents did most of the modeling and reinforcement that she and her assistant teachers would usually do. "It was a difficult time for parents," she said, "and I really tried to give as much support as I could. I shared PowerPoint slides, activities, photos, whatever might help."

Pino earned a graduate-level certificate in applied behavior analysis (BCBA) from Mercy College in August 2020. The techniques she learned will help her increase students' meaningful behaviors and reduce those that are harmful or that interfere with learning. In one particularly memorable project for a course, she created a functional behavioral assessment and then a behavior intervention plan, skills that she used soon

after at work with a student who engaged in self-injurious behaviors. “My supervisor was very impressed that I already had some knowledge on what I was required to do for this documentation,” she recalled.

There is limited official guidance about how schools, teachers and service providers should adjust special education during the COVID-19 school closures and now re-openings. Christine Lang, Ph.D. — the chair of Mercy’s Department of Special Education within the School of Education who teaches some of the courses Pino took as part of the BCBA certificate program — explained that special education legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) does not specifically address a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic school closure. However, a fact sheet sent out in March by the U.S. Department of Education underscored that schools are required to provide services for students with disabilities during this period and that they must provide equal access for all students to any educational opportunities offered. As Lang explained, “School districts seem to be implementing this guidance in different ways.” For example, some districts are continuing to provide support virtually through teletherapy sessions according to the services specified in each student’s IEP, while others are being more flexible given the obstacles to providing therapy online and are working to develop curricular and programmatic materials for parents and caregivers.

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In most cases, schools are relying on parents more than ever to help deliver instruction, especially for students who are less independent or more severely impaired. “I find that my parents are facing challenges trying to get their child to attend to them and follow directions,” Pino said. “All of a sudden, students are in a setting where they’re used to having free range to do whatever they want,

but their parents are placing these demands on them to sit at a table and do work, things they were never expected to do before at home.”

However, Lang cautions anyone against making sweeping generalizations about special education during the COVID-19 school

“Many evidence-based practices within special education involve a multisensory approach, which incorporates visual, auditory and tactile components of instruction,” Lang explained. “There’s a wide array of distance-learning applications that can really be utilized effectively

## Dr. Lang’s Distance Learning Tips FOR PARENTS

### 1 - Create a Visual Schedule (weekly, daily or hourly)

Give children concrete expectations so they can see what they have to do and check those things off.

### 2 - Incorporate Frequent Breaks

Students are used to a lot of motion and fluidity in a classroom, so it is not realistic for children to sit for extended periods of time.

### 3 - Use a Visual Reinforcement Chart

This enables children to see their positive performance and monitor how much time they have left until a task is complete.

### 4 - Avoid Confrontation Around Schoolwork

This can create a new set of avoidance behaviors that can be challenging to overcome.

closures. “Because special education by nature is an individualized approach in which instruction is tailored to meet each student’s diverse learning needs, this situation is different for every child and every family. Some students might be more independent at being able to access their instruction, and some might need a lot more hand-holding and support. And some teachers and service providers may be more skilled at delivering instruction online.”

Pino remained optimistic about how her students are faring at home. For one, they have become more successful with the morning meeting: “In the beginning, it was really difficult to even have students sit through five minutes of the morning meeting. But after six weeks, they were all able to have their attention on me for the entire time.” Even more exciting is that some students are truly maintaining their skills, whether that means continuing to respond to a direction the first time or continuing to emit a certain vocalization.

Technology does have a place within special education, both in classrooms and for distance learning.

to meet student goals. So this time might not be as detrimental as people are thinking just because students are experiencing different ways of learning.”

Perhaps most importantly, teachers and parents have developed a closer relationship in many cases given the greater reliance on parental involvement. That is certainly the case in Pino’s classroom. According to Lang, the strength of this relationship relates to student success: “Research shows that when parents are involved in their children’s educations, it often leads to better outcomes for the children. This time might even help improve parent-teacher communication and interaction moving forward.”

Even though she saw some bright spots with distance learning, Pino is eager to return to the classroom: “I really miss my students — seeing the smiles on their faces, playing with them, giving them hugs. I’m finding it really hard to adjust to this new world, even though I understand what is going on. So I can only imagine how my students are feeling. Their whole world has turned upside down.”