Special Educators' Experiences of Roles and Responsibilities in Self-Contained Classes for Students With Emotional/ Behavioral Disorders

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Abstract

Cultivating and retaining special educators competent to serve students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) has proven persistently difficult. Improving educational systems' capacity to meet this challenge will require better understanding of the roles special educators in these settings should be prepared for and supported to fulfill. The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to explore how four special educators in self-contained classes for students with EBD defined and experienced their roles. We found that teachers defined their primary roles as promoting students' behavioral and academic growth; however, they also described experiencing dissonance between their ideal roles and their actual daily work. This dissonance was evident in two respects. First, extra responsibilities and emergent responsibilities occupied substantial energy. Second, social and material contexts often facilitated their behavioral role but less often supported their academic role. Findings have implications for improving the quality of the teacher workforce in self-contained settings for students with EBD.

Keywords

emotional and behavioral disorders, working conditions, qualitative research, special education teachers, self-contained classes

Strong, consistent evidence of teachers' effects on student outcomes has created a consensus that cultivating and sustaining a skilled teacher workforce is imperative (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010). Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) are in particular need of skilled special educators (Conroy, Alter, Boyd, & Bettini, 2014). Although students with EBD constitute a small proportion of the overall student population, their substantial social-emotional and academic difficulties place them at especially high risk of negative outcomes, including drop-out and incarceration (Wagner, 2014); responding to their complex challenges and preventing negative outcomes require special educators who possess sophisticated knowledge and skill for both behavioral and academic interventions (Conroy et al., 2014). This is particularly important in self-contained special education settings, where 36.3% of the approximately 350,000 K–12 students identified with EBD in the United States receive instruction for more than 60% of the day (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2016). These specialized settings are intended to provide the most

effective, intensive academic and social-emotional interventions (Rozalski, Stewart, & Miller, 2010).

Yet, cultivating and retaining skilled special educators to serve students with EBD in self-contained settings has been persistently challenging (Conroy et al., 2014). Research highlights several dimensions of this challenge: First, special educators serving students with EBD are significantly less qualified (in terms of experience, licensure, etc.) than other special educators (e.g., Billingsley, Fall, & Williams, 2006). Second, special educators report experiencing

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challenging working conditions in self-contained settings for students with EBD (e.g., Bettini, Cumming, Merrill, Brunsting, & Liaupsin, 2016). Third, special educators serving this population tend to be more stressed (Singh & Billingsley, 1996) and burned out (e.g., Embich, 2001) than other special educators. Fourth, special educators serving students with EBD tend to leave teaching more rapidly than other special educators (Gilmour, 2017). Finally, special educators' academic instruction for students with EBD is seldom of high quality (e.g., Levy & Vaughn, 2002; Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2011). Collectively, these studies indicate that educational systems are currently failing to cultivate and retain special educators capable of effectively serving students with EBD (Conroy et al., 2014).

To develop a special education teacher workforce with the capacity to effectively serve students with EBD in self-contained settings, teacher educators must ensure that special educators have knowledge and skills to enact effective academic and behavioral practices within schools' political and social structures (Youngs, Frank, Thum, & Low, 2012). Furthermore, to sustain special educators throughout their careers, school systems should be aligned with preparation, providing conditions (e.g., instructional resources, collegial support) necessary to enact practices special educators learn in preservice preparation (Brownell et al., 2010; Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005).

Aligning preservice preparation and in-service school systems will first require a shared understanding of special educators' roles, a shared conception of what special educators should be prepared and supported to do (Brownell et al., 2010). Yet, no research to date has documented the nature of special educators' roles in self-contained classes for students with EBD (Bettini et al., 2016). Without understanding the daily roles and responsibilities special educators must fulfill, teacher educators and leaders may be ill equipped to provide appropriate preparation and support. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore special educators' lived experiences of their roles and responsibilities serving students with EBD in self-contained classes. We examined, first, how special educators defined their roles and responsibilities, and second, how they experienced their roles and responsibilities.

Conceptual Framework: Role Theory

We situated this study within role theory (Biddle, 1986), which conceptualizes how individuals in social organizations (such as schools; Youngs et al., 2012) fulfill a particular role in the organization. Role theory posits that roles are defined by an agreed-upon purpose, and by "patterned and characteristic" behaviors that are purpose directed (Biddle, 1986, p. 87). Roles are inherently emergent, not static; they evolve in response to demands that arise from one's daily efforts to fulfill expectations within a particular context. For

example, teachers may take on new responsibilities to remove barriers to fulfilling their role or respond to others' expectations. Thus, the roles and responsibilities professionals fulfill in practice may differ from those specified in their job description, and may include tasks invisible to others (Biddle, 1986).

Role theory informed this investigation in several respects: First, we anticipated that special educators would have unique insights into their own roles and responsibilities, and could reveal emergent dimensions of their roles that would not be evident to administrators and colleagues. Second, we drew on role theory to distinguish between roles and responsibilities (Parker, 2007). Roles are purposes (or functions) individuals fulfill in an organization; responsibilities are tasks through which individuals seek to fulfill their role (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991; Parker, 2007).

Teachers' Roles and Responsibilities in Self-Contained Classes for Students With EBD

Scholars recommend that in self-contained classes for students with EBD, special educators' primary roles and responsibilities include using evidence-based practices to (a) provide effective academic instruction, (b) teach social-emotional skills, (c) use group management practices, and (d) implement function-based intervention plans (e.g., Conroy & Sutherland, 2012). However, studies of special educators' time use during the school day find that their actual responsibilities may be more complex and extensive than researchers' recommendations assume (e.g., Bettini, Kimerling, Park, & Murphy, 2015; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). These studies have documented that many special educators spend limited time on instruction, and they are often charged with many additional tasks, unrelated to students' academic or behavioral instruction. For instance, Vannest and Hagan-Burke examined 2,200 hr of time-use logs from 36 special educators. On average, special educators spent only 37% of their time on instruction, instructional support, and assessment, combined. Much of special educators' time was, instead, occupied by administrative and supervisory tasks.

In addition, key stakeholders may often inaccurately understand the extent of special educators' responsibilities (Franz et al., 2008). For instance, Franz and colleagues found that administrators significantly underestimated the time special educators had to spend on administrative and supervisory tasks, yet overestimated the time special educators had available for instruction, collaboration, and planning.

Collectively, these studies indicate that there may be a disconnect between administrators' and researchers' perceptions of special educators' roles and their actual daily work (Bettini et al., 2015; Franz et al., 2008; Vannest &

Table 1. Participant and School District Demographic Information.

Characteristics	District A		District B	
	Melanie	Louise	Rebecca	Diedre
Grade levels served	3rd–5th	6th–8th	9th–12th	2nd–6th
Ethnicity	White	White	Hispanic/Latinx	White
Degree status	Master's	Master's	Bachelor's	Bachelor's
Years of teaching				
Overall	4	14	12	4
Special education	4	14	12	4
Students with E/BD	3	14	12	4
In current classroom	1	1	6	4
At current school	1	9	6	4
District % FRPL	70.6		20.4	
District student race/ ethnicity	50% Hispanic/Latinx 24% African American 17% Caucasian 6.9% Two or more races 1.2% Asian American <1% Native American, Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander		64.9% Caucasian 25% Hispanic/Latinx 5.7% African American <1% Asian American, Native American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, two or more races	

Note. E/BD = emotional/behavioral disorders; FRPL = free and reduced-price lunch.

Hagan-Burke, 2010). However, only one of these studies focused on special educators in self-contained settings for students with EBD (Bettini et al., 2015), and none explored special educators' experiences of their roles and responsibilities (Bettini et al., 2016).

Better understanding special educators' lived experiences of their roles and responsibilities could help teacher educators and school leaders more effectively prepare and support special educators to fulfill their complex roles in schools. Special educators are uniquely situated to provide insider perspectives on what their roles and responsibilities involve. Thus, we explored how special educators in self-contained classes for students with EBD define and experience their roles and responsibilities, examining the following research questions:

> **Research Question 1:** How do special educators define their roles and responsibilities in self-contained classes for students with EBD?
> **Research Question 2:** How do special educators experience their roles and responsibilities teaching students with EBD in self-contained classes?

Method

Transcendental phenomenology, a qualitative method, was most appropriate for this investigation. This methodology focuses on describing the essential elements of an experience (Moustakas, 1994). We selected this method due to (a) its epistemological alignment with role theory, (b) its requirement that researchers maintain focus on the

complexity of participants' experiences, and (c) its rigorous processes for bracketing researchers' subjectivity. Because phenomenology has not been widely used in special education, we describe our methods in detail, including assumptions and methods common to this methodology, and how we operationalized those assumptions and methods in this study.

Participants and Context

Participants included four special educators serving students with EBD in self-contained special education classes on the campus of four neighborhood schools (i.e., not alternative educational settings) in two districts. District A is a low-performing, urban district in the Northeast (see Table 1 for participant and district demographic data). District B is a high-performing, suburban district in the Southwest, which operates on a modified year-round schedule. In District A, two of four eligible special educators participated; in District B, both eligible special educators participated.

All four classes served only students with EBD. Although some students had other comorbid disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, speech and language impairments), their primary category under Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) was emotional disturbance (which we refer to by the term EBD). At the elementary level, Melanie taught third- to fifth-grade students in District A, and Diedre taught second- to sixth-grade students in District B. At the secondary level, Louise taught sixth- to eighth-grade

students in a middle school in District A, and Rebecca taught ninth- to 12th-grade students in a high school in District B. Melanie's, Diedre's, and Rebecca's classes were all located on an above-ground floor of their school building, alongside general education teachers' classes, and their buildings were all modern, clean buildings that had been built within the past 5 to 15 years. Louise's class was in the basement of her school, along with several other classes, such as the technology education class, a bilingual class, and a self-contained class for students with intellectual disabilities. Her school was built in the 1950s and remodeled in the 1990s; the building's appearance was more dated and worn than the other teachers' schools, but still functional, open, and clean, with current technology. Louise's class was also slightly different from the other teachers' classes, as her school had deliberately separated students with internalizing EBDs (e.g., anxiety) from students with externalizing EBDs (e.g., aggression); her class included only students with internalizing EBDs.

We purposively sampled special educators with at least 3 years' experience teaching students with EBD in self-contained classes. Novices are still developing an understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and it was important for participants to have sufficient experience to gain a full conception of their role in self-contained classes for students with EBD. Louise had the most experience teaching; she had a master's degree and had been teaching students with EBD in her current school for 14 years. Rebecca had a bachelor's degree and had been teaching students with EBD for 12 years, including 6 years in another state and 6 years in her current classroom. She shared that she was well prepared for this job as a result of training she received in her first position and her experiences with family members who had substantial mental health disorders. Diedre had a bachelor's degree and had been teaching for 4 years, all in her current self-contained class. She entered teaching on an emergency license, and pursued licensure part-time through a nondegree program during her first 3 years of teaching; she was fully certified at the time of the study. Melanie had a master's degree and had been teaching for 4 years. She taught students with learning disabilities for 1 year but wanted to work with students with EBD; therefore, she moved to a self-contained school for students with EBD in District A. She taught in the self-contained school for 2 years, and then moved to her current self-contained class for students with EBD.

Procedures

Data collection. The first author conducted one semistructured interview with each participant in his or her classroom, between May and September 2012; all interviews took place during participants' typical school year. This author had prior positive relationships with three participants (Diedre,

Rebecca, Louise); her rapport with them facilitated deep, rich interviews. This author spent time building a relationship with Melanie (e.g., observing her class, having informal conversations) before conducting the interview, to develop sufficient rapport that Melanie would also feel comfortable sharing rich, authentic perspectives in the interview.

Interview questions were open-ended and structured so as to elicit thick descriptions of participants' experiences. We first asked participants to take the interviewer on a tour through their workday, describing what they do, when they do it, and how they think and feel about it. We then asked participants to describe any responsibilities they have outside the contractual workday. Subsequent questions asked about which responsibilities participants felt most and least confident and capable doing. Throughout the interviews, probing questions prompted participants to deeply discuss their experiences. For example, Rebecca shared that she chooses to teach summer and intersession classes during vacations because "When you're doing those things you have breaks and lunch and . . . you're able to network." The interviewer then asked her to elaborate on why she was not able to network with colleagues during the regular school year. This led to an extended discussion of why Rebecca was isolated from her colleagues. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis. We analyzed data using transcendental phenomenological analysis, an inductive method focused on "What an experience means for the persons who have had the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Transcendental phenomenology is rooted in Husserl's subjectivist epistemological perspective. It assumes that the meaning of a phenomenon (i.e., special educators' roles in self-contained classes for students with EBD) emerges through an interaction between objective dimensions of the phenomena (i.e., its objectively real physical/temporal features) and an individual's subjective experiences of those features (Moustakas, 1994). From this perspective, the objective dimensions matter because they structure and constrain the experiences an individual can have; yet, the goal of the analysis was to communicate participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This method provides four processes (epoche, reduction, variation, synthesis) to help researchers access essential textural elements (i.e., what participants experience) and structural elements (i.e., why they experience the phenomena a particular way, how they interpret the experience; Moustakas, 1994).

Epoche. In epoche, researchers set aside, or bracket, preconceived notions by explicitly stating and then setting aside subjective perspectives throughout analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche began before we examined data, when all researchers wrote subjectivity statements disclosing our experiences of and perspectives on special educators' roles

in self-contained classes for students with EBD, and how our prior experiences might influence our interpretations of data. Understanding one another's subjectivity helped us hold each other accountable for bracketing our perspectives. Team members had varied prior experiences, including (a) one researcher had taught self-contained classes for students with EBD in both districts, (b) two researchers had taught students with EBD in inclusive settings, and (c) one researcher had completed a preservice practicum in a self-contained class for students with EBD. Diverse backgrounds augmented our ability to view participants' experiences from multiple perspectives.

Phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological reduction is an iterative process of closely examining data, viewing each individual experience on its own terms, and "reducing" it to essential components (termed "horizons"; Moustakas, 1994). In this process, units of meaning are reduced to essences that retain participants' original language. For instance, we reduced Diedre's statement: "Because there's always something I forgot, and the laundry list is just so darn long, and I can't keep track of it, and no matter how many lists I make . . .," to "I always forget something because the laundry list is so long that I can't keep track of it." Initially, each statement is treated as having equal significance, but we then eliminated horizons that were irrelevant or repetitive, and merged those with overlapping meaning.

We reduced participants' interviews to essential horizons through a collaborative process called communalization (Moustakas, 1994), which is similar to peer debriefing (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). The purpose of communalization is for researchers to reciprocally support one another in perceiving participants' essential meanings while bracketing their subjectivity. Each transcript was assigned to a pair of researchers, who reduced their transcript to essential horizons, then met to discuss each horizon and reach consensus. After the pair reached consensus, they presented horizons to the whole team. Team members interrogated each horizon, comparing them with original data and making adjustments while seeking consensus about how best to represent participants' experiences.

We then reconstituted horizons into a coherent description of each participant's experience. We organized horizons thematically, joining them together into a coherent narrative of each participant's experience of his or her responsibilities (for reference, textural descriptions were two to three single-spaced pages, compared with original transcripts that were 12–30 single-spaced pages). For each transcript, pairs of two researchers independently organized horizons into themes, created textural descriptions, and then came together to analyze descriptions and reach consensus. They then presented the agreed-upon textural description to the team. The team compared the textural description with the original data, seeking consensus about how to construct the textural description to accurately represent the participant's experience.

Imaginative variation. Imaginative variation is when "many possibilities" inherent in the data "are examined and explicated reflectively" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). The intent is to identify the essential structures of the phenomenon, the explanation for why the participant experienced the phenomena in a particular way. This process supports researchers in looking outside preconceived notions for explanations. During imaginative variation, researchers carefully read each textural description, imagining all plausible ways of explaining why participants experienced the phenomena in particular ways. We then examined data in light of plausible explanations to determine which explanations the data supported. We used plausible explanations that were supported by data to create an explanation of the structures underlying the experience and how these structures contributed to participants' experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Two team members engaged in imaginative variation for each transcript, independently constructing structural descriptions, and came to consensus before the team interrogated and revised them. Structural descriptions were approximately half a page.

Synthesis. Finally, the team collaboratively synthesized textural and structural descriptions across participants, co-creating an analytic synthesis of what participants experienced and why they experienced it in particular ways (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness and credibility. We fostered trustworthiness and credibility in three ways: First, epoche supported us in bracketing our prior experiences when interpreting data. Each researcher's subjectivity statement was in a shared folder, and we referred to one another's statements throughout analysis. As one example, the first author was more attentive to Diedre's and Melanie's concerns about sacrifices to academic instruction than to Louise's and Rebecca's comfort with these sacrifices; the fourth author used the first author's subjectivity statement to point out how her interpretation might be biased by her own experiences and concerns with weak instruction in self-contained classes for students with EBD. This dialogue helped all authors attend to the full variation within participants' experiences.

Second, we used communalization (Moustakas, 1994) to engage in every step of analysis collaboratively. During each stage, each transcript was assigned to a pair of researchers; partners were deliberately varied throughout the analysis so that each researcher was partnered with each other researcher at some point and so that each researcher engaged in part of the analysis of every transcript. Pairs of researchers independently engaged in that step of analysis,

then met to come to consensus with one another before bringing their consensus to the whole team. The whole team interrogated their analytic findings in light of the data, while seeking consensus about how best to represent participants' experiences. We did not proceed to the next analytic step until the whole team concurred with the findings for the present step; for example, we did not organize horizons thematically until we had reached consensus about the horizons. When consensus could not be reached, we redistributed transcripts and changed partners, so that all team members could come to a deeper understanding of the data while we conducted the same analytic step another time. We proceeded to the next step once we reached consensus.

Finally, we engaged in member checking (Brantlinger et al., 2005), sharing results with all participants via email, and asking them to provide feedback on how well results captured their experiences. Rebecca pointed out one error, in which we stated that she did not use a social skills curriculum when she did. However, all participants agreed that the results accurately represented their experiences. For example, Melanie shared that it was "very accurate, thank you! It looks wonderful!" Louise agreed, saying, "It looks great!!! I think you and your co-authors did a wonderful job describing the impact of extra duties on instruction."

Results

Research Question 1: Core Roles

Special educators' descriptions of their daily activities revealed that they had two core roles that they felt were central to teaching students with EBD in self-contained classes: First, they described developing students' behavioral skills. Second, they described providing academic instruction, so that students could access and succeed in general education curricula.

Role 1: Supporting students' behavior. Special educators engaged in a number of responsibilities designed to support students' behavioral skills.

Using incentive systems. All teachers reported using a point or level system to monitor and reinforce behavior skills. For instance, Melanie explained that students earned points for behaviors, and reinforcers based on those points: "It's a leveled system . . . [with] a classroom menu" (see Note 1). To maintain incentive systems, teachers said that they purchased reinforcers, managed access to reinforcers, maintained behavior data, and conferenced with students about behavior.

Providing physical safety and comfort. Special educators described attending carefully to students' physical safety and comfort. All teachers said that they monitored students throughout the day, including during their own lunch and planning periods. For example, Melanie said, "I have students up here for lunch with me, if . . . they aren't going to be safe." Similarly, Rebecca said,

> They cannot be left alone . . . A lot of times they come from a mental hospital, or they're coming from Juvi and they can't trust themselves, and they can't be trusted. So I just need to have that watchful eye on them at all times.

Special educators described how they structured their day and their classrooms with attention to students' physical safety and comfort. For instance, Rebecca explained,

> We leave [for the bus] about 5 minutes before the bell rings . . . because we don't want to get students in the crowd. There's just so many students on this campus and it can really stress them out.

Diedre described attending to "the sensory feel of the room" before school, so that students would feel calm and safe coming in. Diedre also explained that students were not eating school lunch, resulting in "hungry, miserable kids" and behavior problems in the afternoon, so she began a daily cooking class in which students prepared their own meals while learning cooking skills.

The elementary teachers, Diedre and Melanie, also described addressing hygiene. Melanie said, "We have a kid that some days smells so bad . . ., so [I'm] taking him down to the nurse . . . getting him clean clothes." Deidre shared that she began providing hygiene lessons after cleaning up after a student who had been dancing while using the class bathroom.

Coordinating with paraprofessionals. All special educators said that they coordinated with paraprofessionals to support student behavior. For example, Rebecca said, "The first thing I do [in the morning] is talk with the staff. We review everything that happened the day before . . . because we might need to develop a plan . . ."

Building relationships. Louise and Rebecca described investing energy in relationships, so that students would feel a sense of belonging. Louise wanted students to feel "like a family," so she participated in social activities (e.g., lunch, gym). Rebecca described the importance of being emotionally present: "I have to be 'on' . . . If they have a problem or issue, I'm here." She shared that relationships with staff were important for her students, because "We're their constant."

Ensuring consistency. Rebecca and Melanie explained that consistency was essential for students' behavior. Rebecca said,

They know that they can come to the classroom and every day . . . they know they're going to have their bell work . . . they're going to have the three periods . . . they're going to see Mrs. W and Mr. P and Mrs. H.

Melanie's interview was punctuated with references to routines, as in the following quote: "They know, as part of their routine, they come in, they hand me their . . . home folders and they start their morning work."

Building relationships with parents and outside service providers. Louise and Melanie described developing relationships with parents and outside service providers. For instance, Melanie said that she sent home students' point sheets daily, sharing: "I do a lot of parent contacts, even just for positive." She felt that relationships allowed her to obtain releases to coordinate with outside service providers, such as social workers and psychologists.

Planning for and dealing with emergencies. Teachers shared that, although it did not happen often, they did physically restrain students when necessary. Melanie said, "I'm trained to do [restraint], and if that's what I have to do to maintain safety, then that's [what I'll do]." Melanie also planned in advance for these situations: "[Students are] trained to get their book boxes and read silently. They also know that if they do that, they earn bonus points."

Teaching social skills. Rebecca and Diedre described collaboratively teaching social skills. For example, Diedre said, "The behavior specialist and the school psychologist come in and we do a group together using the social thinking curriculum." Rebecca said she focused much of her social skills instruction on "role-playing . . . basic social skills" and job skills.

Role 2: Supporting students' academic growth. Special educators were responsible for academics, and they engaged in various responsibilities to support students' academic growth.

Planning instruction. Diedre, Melanie, and Louise described spending extensive time planning. Melanie said, "It's a LOT of lesson planning" that is "very time-consuming." Diedre shared, "If I did [plans] the way I wanted . . . [with] hands-on activities . . . it would probably take 10–12 hours to plan a week of assignments for one student."

In contrast, Rebecca described minimal lesson planning demands:

It really doesn't take me that long because . . . I've been doing it for 12 years. I follow the . . . curriculum calendar and I just have all of the materials . . . Honestly it takes me less than 20 minutes daily . . .

Delivering instruction. Special educators reported that delivering instruction in multiple subjects and grade levels posed logistical challenges, such as how to simultaneously teach standards from multiple grade levels. To address these challenges, teachers described using small-group and differentiated instruction, while making compromises in what standards to teach. Melanie, Louise, and Diedre grouped students for small-group reading and math instruction (based on skills), while teaching one grade's science and social studies standards to all students. Melanie said,

Everything is . . . workshop based in here, it's not . . . whole group instruction . . . I have [three] reading groups. . ., [two] math groups . . . [In] science, I'm . . . taking the third grade science and differentiating it. So the kids in fourth and fifth grade might not be getting the same [science] material [as grade-level peers], but they're at least getting the same skills . . .

Rebecca was the only teacher who did not describe challenges to providing instruction across grades and subjects. She reported dividing her class into one group of ninth and 10th graders and one group of 11th and 12th graders. She provided instruction to one group in the morning, while the other went to community-based instruction or transition activities; in the afternoon, groups switched. All students in a group received the same instruction on the same standards.

Supporting paraprofessionals' instruction. Diedre described supporting paraprofessionals' instructional skills, so they could help with instruction. She said, "I teach them the resources and how you look at a standard and decide which resources you could use . . ."

Improving their own instructional skills. Diedre described seeking out professional development to improve her instruction. She had begun teaching on an emergency certificate, and said, "The first year I didn't know what a standard was . . . I didn't know how to teach." She used personal time to read books, consult professional websites, and attend conferences. She felt that she was becoming "more confident . . . I finally feel . . . I'm able to teach a particular standard."

Supporting movement into inclusive settings. Diedre and Louise explained that the ultimate goal was for students to transition back into general education, which required them to

collaborate with general ed. teacher, train the parapro . . . make decisions on what work they're going to do in that classroom and what work they're going to complete in my classroom . . . keep track of what they're doing in the general ed classroom and making sure it's the same as what I'm doing, or if it's not . . . change [my lesson plans] over to what they're doing. (Diedre)
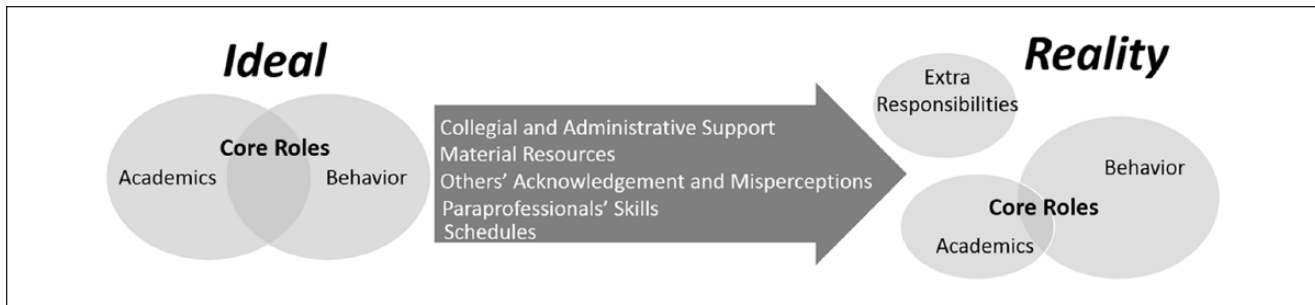
Figure 1. Special educators' experiences of their roles and responsibilities.

Research Question 2: Experiences of Their Roles and Responsibilities

Special educators described experiencing great pride in their success at promoting students' behavioral growth (their first role), yet experiencing constraints on their ability to provide academic instruction of the caliber they felt students deserved (their second role). Dissonance between their ideal and actual role was a source of stress. They felt that this dissonance was shaped by the social and material resources available to them. Figure 1 illustrates this analytic synthesis, and the following sections describe these findings in detail.

Pride in promoting students' behavioral growth. Special educators described a strong sense of accomplishment in their behavioral role, often sharing stories of students' behavioral growth. For example, Rebecca said,

> When we got [Ben] . . . he was a mess, his hair was all greasy and long, he didn't show up to classes, he was depressed, he was causing fights . . . Within 3 months his hair was cut, he was dressing better, he was showing up to school.

Louise shared a story of a student who

> was talking about, "I'm not going to high school next [year], you're not gonna make me go to high school, no, no, no!" And [now] he's talking about [how] he's going to do tennis [in high school] . . . Those [experiences] definitely make [this job] worth it.

Sacrifices in academic instruction. Teachers felt successful in their behavioral roles, yet they described having to make sacrifices in their instructional role. Melanie said, "I struggle a lot with teaching everything," and Rebecca explained that lessons had to be "watered down a little bit" compared with general education. Louise and Diedre both felt curricula were the biggest frustration. Louise stated, "It's difficult to keep them all where they should be. I do try hard to keep them working on the same topics that they're working

on in the regular ed classes," but it was "tough" to differentiate for all grade levels. Diedre shared, "I always feel like my planning is never enough. It's never what I want it to be . . . I'm pulling resources from here and there . . . but I never feel like I hit that mark." All special educators described making compromises in academic instruction, yet they experienced this compromise in quite different ways, on a continuum from feeling troubled to accepting this sacrifice as intrinsic to their job.

Troubled. Diedre and Melanie were troubled when they had to make sacrifices to academic instruction. Diedre shared, "I can't hit every grade level and every subject. So I end up feeling like I'm never really doing my job, and I'm always letting the kids down." Melanie felt that she had developed systems that enabled her to consistently provide strong instruction. However, she shared that, when she first entered her program, she had to put behavioral systems first: "I had to kind of back off [my academic expectations] . . . and that was hard for me."

Diedre and Melanie both reported feeling most proud of strong instruction. For instance, Diedre expressed pride in her ability to plan and deliver academic instruction, saying, "I did a fraction lesson that went really, really well," and shared in detail how the lesson supported students' engagement and fraction knowledge. Melanie also described experiencing the greatest sense of accomplishment when she could "sit back and look at everyone engaged and doing something [academic]." Melanie explained that academic engagement "means that their behaviors are under control and they're learning . . . It's the absolute best."

Acceptance. Rebecca and Louise felt more comfortable with compromises to academic instruction. Louise said, "Sometimes I wish I could give them a higher level of instruction, but that's not always their number one issue." Rebecca was most accepting of this compromise: "They're not getting the same amount [of academics] they were in general ed., but they can't function that way, that's why they're in here."

Essential Structures: Influences on Special Educators' Efforts to Fulfill Their Roles

During imaginative variation, we analyzed the essential structures underlying these experiences, examining why teachers felt successful in their behavioral role, yet experienced constraints on their academic role. We found that the material and social context of their work shaped and constrained how they could fulfill their roles, often supporting their behavioral role but less often supporting their academic role. They specifically described being influenced by material resources, extraneous responsibilities, paraprofessional support, collegial support, acknowledgment from others, and schedules. Teachers did not passively ignore challenges; rather, they each explained how they actively counteracted challenges in one or more areas.

Material resources. Special educators described how material resources supported and constrained the ways they fulfilled their behavioral and academic roles.

Behavior. All teachers described how material resources supported behavior incentive systems. Diedre and Rebecca both had a classroom van for reward field trips and a large budget. Diedre shared how the budget allowed her to "provide . . . things for kids that they need," especially because she had complete control over how to spend it. Diedre and Rebecca said that they were able to provide activity and tangible rewards. Louise and Melanie described resources that supported activity rewards. For instance, Louise shared that her school had a room with "a Wii, an X-Box, and a pool table" to which students could earn access. In addition, Diedre and Rebecca both had a social skills curriculum.

Academic instruction. Melanie and Diedre both described how instructional resources were important for instruction, though their access to these resources differed. Diedre said that she had a curriculum calendar but no resources (e.g., textbooks) for following the calendar. She said, "I feel like the curriculum ends up being hit or miss." In contrast, Melanie appreciated having technology and materials for instruction. She explained how her math curriculum facilitated serving multiple grade levels, because it had an online component, so "kids can work on their grade level . . .independently, and then I have them rotate [to work] with me."

Teachers' responses to insufficient material resources. To address lack of academic resources, Diedre reported spending extensive time identifying, purchasing, and organizing instructional materials. In addition, she tried to access other teachers' materials, setting up "three different systems" to access other teachers' lesson plans. However, she shared that each system "just doesn't last," in part because she had no time to meet with other teachers. She also reported training paraprofessionals to identify resources, so she could delegate responsibility to them.

Extra responsibilities. Diedre, Melanie, and Louise all reported having extensive extra responsibilities that they felt took away from core roles. Louise had previously been a department chair, a full-time position. When she created the self-contained program, she was not released from her responsibilities as a department chair. As a result, she described extensive extra responsibilities, including supervising all paraprofessionals in her school, supporting disciplinary and transportation decisions for all students with disabilities in her school, and teaching an advisory class, among others. She felt "pulled so much . . . I'm only one person."

Melanie said that she was often charged with managing behavior for students in time-out from other classes: "I'm trying to teach my class and [simultaneously] process with them." Administrators also relied on her to help with in-school suspension. Melanie repeatedly expressed how these tasks took up limited planning time: "I'll be asked to fix an IEP . . . or help someone with an IEP. While I don't mind doing any of that, it does take up my prep time."

Diedre described extensive extra responsibilities:

There's just an inordinate amount of paperwork . . . Transportation requests . . . Sending receipts in from your purchase order . . . writing down the things you've purchased . . . They're tiny little chores, but they add up.

Diedre said that she was also responsible for supervising after-school events, even though "my students never come." Diedre and Melanie shared that extra responsibilities were a major source of stress. Melanie said, "It's the other demands I have . . . not so much classroom duties—that make this job stressful." Diedre said, "I always feel like I'm just never doing quite good enough . . . There's always something I forgot, and the laundry list is just so darn long, and I can't keep track of it." Diedre shared that, as a result, "there are days when I don't want to do this anymore."

Teachers' responses to problems with extra responsibilities. Louise was the only teacher to report pushing back on extra responsibilities by delegating some tasks to other special educators. Yet, she had to frequently manage "departmental fires" during class time.

Paraprofessionals. Teachers explained that paraprofessionals were essential overall; strong paraprofessionals helped them fulfill their roles, whereas weaker paraprofessionals created extra challenges. Rebecca shared, "It's like a ballet in here . . . I couldn't do this without Seth and Sally." In contrast, Diedre expressed frustration that two of her paraprofessionals were irresponsible, leading her to feel that she

had "two extra students." Teachers explained how they specifically relied on paraprofessionals to support their behavioral and academic roles.

Behavior. All teachers shared that they relied on paraprofessionals to be a consistent, calm, and caring presence in students' lives, monitoring their safety and helping them learn expectations. For example, Diedre described how her strongest paraprofessional, Ivy, is "very calm and . . . she keeps them very calm." In contrast, Diedre reported having to frequently remind weaker paraprofessionals to model appropriate behavior.

Academic instruction. All special educators described relying on paraprofessionals to deliver instruction to small groups. For instance, Melanie said that she "placed kids in reading groups," and staffing informed her grouping decisions: "I have enough staff right now that I have three [reading] groups."

Teachers' responses to paraprofessional challenges. To support paraprofessionals with insufficient skills, Diedre, Melanie, and Louise described seeking opportunities to train paraprofessionals. Louise said that she used early-release days for training, even though she had to miss her own professional development. Diedre described using 15 min of planning time, before school, to provide training, and she posted visuals to remind paraprofessionals of expectations. Melanie did not have time outside the school day for training, even at the beginning of the year. She reported embedding training in the school day.

Collegial and administrative support. Special educators described feeling a sense of general goodwill from colleagues and administrators. For example, Melanie shared, "[They] are wonderful . . . I do have a lot of support." This goodwill sometimes translated into active support for their behavioral role; however, none described active support for their academic role.

Behavior. Diedre, Rebecca, and Louise described a broad network of colleagues who supported their behavioral role. Rebecca said, "We can call administration, we can call our counselor, we can call security [for help]." Louise collaborated with another self-contained special education teacher and a part-time social worker, saying, "It's phenomenal . . . there's that extra person that you can . . . bounce things off of." Diedre and Rebecca had biweekly meetings with "the principal, behavior specialist, the psychologist, and the special ed director, and the parapros . . . [to] go over each student . . . talk about how they're doing [behaviorally] . . ." (Diedre).

Melanie was the only teacher who did not describe opportunities to collaborate on behavior. She said, "I'd really like . . . to get together [with other self-contained

teachers] . . . to talk with other people that are having similar issues . . ." However, "Collaboration doesn't really happen." The only time Melanie described active collegial support for behavior was during home visits: "I'll take someone from school, usually the psychologist or the social worker."

Academic instruction. Melanie, Rebecca, and Diedre described feeling "secluded" (Melanie) and "left out" (Rebecca) of academic collaboration. Teachers shared that there were "pros and cons" (Melanie) to isolation. On one hand, isolation provided them with autonomy. As Diedre said, "I like the freedom that I have . . . being in control of my own program."

On the other hand, isolation left them without support. Diedre highlighted the disparity between her and general educators, saying, in general education, "Everyone [in a grade level] works on the lessons they're going to do for that week, and there's four or five of them, and they . . . all bring something to the table." In contrast, she planned multiple subjects and grade levels alone. Louise was the only teacher who described academic collaboration; she said she met with "grade-level teachers . . . for materials and to see how far off we are [in the curriculum]."

Teachers' responses to isolation. Melanie advocated for collaboration among self-contained teachers and for her principal to revise her schedule to permit collaboration. Rebecca taught intersession classes during vacation, in part, so she could "crawl out from under the rock." She shared how this provided opportunities she did not typically have: "When you're doing [intersession] you have breaks and lunch . . . you're able to network."

Others' acknowledgment and misperceptions. Special educators often described how colleagues, administrators, and parents acknowledged and respected some aspects of their work, while substantially misunderstanding other aspects.

Behavior. Rebecca and Louise both felt recognized and respected for their behavioral role. Rebecca shared how colleagues and administrators "saw [Ben's] transformation, and they were like, 'Wow, they are doing something positive and powerful in there'." Louise said, "It's nice to hear from administration, Oh, I haven't seen so-and-so [in the office] in a long time!"

In contrast, Melanie worried that others misunderstood her class: "I worry that [administrators] might see an interaction that doesn't seem, quote, 'appropriate' to them." She felt others did not fully grasp her students' behavior challenges:

> People will come in here, and they'll say, "I want your job, it's so easy!.." . . . I'll say, "You have no idea how hard we've worked . . ." Some days, it does look very easy . . . there are other days where it is a complete and utter nightmare.

Although Louise felt recognized for her behavioral role, she shared Melanie's concern:

> I don't think people realize how much is involved in [this job] . . . [They] say, "Oh, you only have seven kids . . ." [I would tell them] "Would you like to come in and teach for a day in my classroom, because seven kids who are . . . psychiatrically involved—it's difficult."

Academics. Melanie was the only teacher who felt others paid attention to her academic role; administrators examined lesson plans and conducted informal observations of instruction. She felt confident in her instruction, but she also shared that being "in the spotlight" was stressful: "We're not a high performing school district and . . . there's always a tension . . . There's representatives from the state in here, city council's in here . . . That's a little nerve-wracking."

In contrast, Rebecca felt that colleagues and administrators did not initially understand her academic role: "People think . . . 'Oh, they're in a self-contained room they're just playing games all day . . .' . . [They thought] it was just babysitting, like a holding spot for throw-away kids."

Extra responsibilities. Diedre never described recognition for behavioral or academic roles; rather, she spoke at length about her administrator's attention to her extra responsibilities:

> I'll be here at six and I'll stay until four, and the principal will come in and say . . . "Did you get this paperwork in?" [I'll say,] "Oh, I forgot. No, it's not in yet." [The principal will say,] "Well, it needs to be."

She continued, "It just takes me really down for the day." As a result, Diedre described choosing between meeting student needs and getting in trouble: "I'm either taking attention away from the kids [by completing extra responsibilities] . . . or hearing about [paperwork from my principal]."

Teachers' responses to others' misperceptions. Melanie and Rebecca actively taught others about their roles. Melanie said, "I've met with [my administrator] . . ., and I've talked about . . . [why] there's not a whole group lesson going on all of the time." Rebecca said, "My first year I asked my principal, 'Can I get up [in faculty meeting] and . . . explain what we do'?"

Schedules. Deidre, Melanie, and Louise all explained how schedules contributed to challenges with academics. Diedre shared that she had no planning period, aside from 15 min before students arrived in the morning. Melanie and Louise both had scheduled plan time, but this time was occupied by other tasks. None of the teachers had a lunch break, because

they had to supervise students while eating. Packed schedules contributed to difficulties planning instruction and collaborating. For instance, Diedre explained that collaboration with general educators happened "on the fly," because she had no planning or lunch period to meet with them.

Rebecca's students were on a shortened day schedule, and she was the only teacher who felt she had adequate planning time, almost 2 hr. However, Rebecca also shared,

> I don't get a lunch . . . I get frustrated . . . I basically have maybe two minutes to myself . . . That's one of the worst things about this job, is I have to be with them the entire time they're on campus.

Teachers' responses to scheduling challenges. Diedre, Melanie, and Louise described spending extensive time working outside their contractual day. Louise said, "Friday I was here until 6:00 . . . lesson planning." They also structured activities, so they could plan and complete paperwork while students were present. For example, Melanie said, "Every Friday my kids usually get a movie. I take that time and I script out what I'm doing for the [next] week."

Discussion

Improving educational systems' ability to prepare and sustain special education teachers in self-contained classes for students with EBD will require a shared understanding of teachers' roles in these settings, a shared conception of what teachers serving students with EBD should be prepared and supported to do (Brownell et al., 2010). We examined special educators' experiences of their roles and responsibilities in self-contained classes for students with EBD. Teachers defined their roles as promoting students' behavioral and academic growth. Yet, they described experiencing dissonance between their ideal roles and their actual daily work. This dissonance was evident in two respects: First, extra responsibilities and emergent responsibilities occupied substantial energy, distracting from core roles; and second, social and material contexts often facilitated their behavioral role but less often supported their academic role.

Extra Responsibilities

Consistent with prior research (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010), teachers described many administrative and supervisory responsibilities unrelated to core roles, such as supervising other teachers' students in time-out (Melanie) and coordinating bus schedules for all students with disabilities in the school (Louise). They felt extra responsibilities interfered with core roles by occupying limited time for planning and collaboration. This indicates a potential misuse of

their time and expertise, as valuable personnel resources were diverted away from students.

Emergent Responsibilities

Consistent with role theory (Biddle, 1986), some responsibilities were emergent, arising from the disparity between students' needs and the support available to meet those needs. These were responsibilities teachers felt were essential for fulfilling their roles, but that extended beyond simply using evidence-based academic and behavioral practices. For example, all special educators reported sacrificing their lunch break to eat with students, as students required constant supervision (Melanie, Rebecca, Diedre), and this was valuable time to build relationships with students (Louise). Although teachers acknowledged the necessity of eating with students, this eliminated their sole opportunity to connect with colleagues and have a personal break.

One of the most demanding emergent responsibilities was training paraprofessionals. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010), paraprofessionals seldom had necessary training to adequately support students, and teachers had little time or support to develop paraprofessionals' skills. Thus, special educators sacrificed limited planning (Diedre) and professional development (Louise) time to provide paraprofessional training.

Fulfilling Academic Versus Behavioral Roles

Special educators felt successful in promoting students' behavioral growth, yet expressed concerns about academic instruction. These concerns are consistent with researchers' previous findings (e.g., Levy & Vaughn, 2002). Teachers explained that several factors contributed to this.

First, they taught multigrade, multisubject classes, yet only Rebecca felt her planning time was adequate. Special educators felt that logistical challenges of planning and delivering a wide variety of academic standards were a barrier to rigorous instruction. Their concerns seem reasonable; providing instruction in a single content area requires deep pedagogical content knowledge (Brownell et al., 2010), and expecting one teacher to have and enact that knowledge across many subjects and grades, without planning time, may be unreasonable. Our methods do not permit conclusions about how instructional responsibilities and planning time affect instruction, and no research, to date, has explored effects of teaching multiple subjects and grades on instruction (Bettini et al., 2016). However, Allinder (1996) did find that special educators who rated planning time insufficient were less likely to implement newly learned practices.

Second, special educators reported having more extensive social and material supports for their behavioral role than their academic role. We cannot draw conclusions about whether these disparities contribute to their perceptions of success in academic versus behavioral roles. However, recent scholarship has found that teachers' collegial support (e.g., Kraft & Papay, 2014) and instructional resources (e.g., Jackson & Makarin, 2016) significantly predict their effectiveness at promoting students' academic growth. In light of this research, our findings raise the possibility that special educators' social and material supports may have contributed to their sense of success in meeting students' behavior needs, while a lack of social and material supports for academic instruction may have challenged their ability to provide strong academics.

Varied responses to dissonance between ideal and actual roles. All teachers reported having to make compromises to academic instruction, yet they varied in their responses to these compromises. Diedre and Melanie felt deeply troubled by these compromises, whereas Rebecca and Louise accepted them as endemic to their job. Scholars, however, generally concur with the perspective that strong instruction is essential for behavioral growth (Conroy et al., 2014). Our analysis does not allow us to determine why Louise and Rebecca felt comfortable with these sacrifices, or what impact this might have had on their instruction.

Limitations

First, findings cannot be generalized due to the sample and analytic procedures. All participants had at least 3 years' experience, and they may differ in important ways from inexperienced special educators and special educators who left before their third year. Similarly, all participants came from two districts, which likely differ greatly from other districts. Special educators also taught in self-contained classes in general education schools; results cannot be applied to special educators in inclusive or in alternative (e.g., therapeutic school) settings.

Second, we examined special educators' subjective experiences, an essential window into their work that has been absent from prior research (Bettini et al., 2016); however, other data (e.g., observations; administrators', parents', and students' perspectives) are necessary to fully understand special educators' roles serving students with EBD in self-contained classes.

Third, despite commonalities among participants' experiences, there were also important differences. Due to the small sample, we cannot draw conclusions about how these differences are related to differences in preparation, knowledge, grade levels, district characteristics, and so on.

Implications for Future Research

We recommend that future research examine whether our participants' experiences are common, using methods that

permit generalization. Researchers could, for example, use surveys to examine whether special educators in these settings often experience dissonance between the roles they feel they should be fulfilling and their daily work, and how this dissonance is influenced by conditions we identified in this analysis. Such studies could also use observational methods such as teacher log data (Franz et al., 2008), or the experience sampling method (e.g., Jones & Youngs, 2012) to better understand the nature of the discrepancy between their ideal and actual roles. Future research could also explore how special educators' experiences vary across different kinds of schools (i.e., elementary, secondary; therapeutic vs. neighborhood schools), and vary depending on their preparation and personal characteristics.

Second, scholars have long expressed their concern that academic instruction in self-contained classes for students with EBD is seldom of adequate quality to meet students' needs (e.g., Conroy et al., 2014); our participants concurred, and our findings indicate conditions that may contribute to this issue. We suggest that future research examine whether these conditions significantly predict instructional quality, using correlational methods (e.g., regression, structural equation modeling). Specifically, researchers could examine how instructional quality is related to (a) paraprofessional support, (b) collegial support for academics and behavior, (c) material resources for academics and behavior, (d) planning time, (e) extra responsibilities, (f) teaching multiple subjects to multiple grades, and (g) administrators' attention to academic and behavioral responsibilities. For example, our participants felt that the number of grades and subjects they taught posed challenges for planning and delivering instruction. Future studies could take their concerns seriously by examining relationships among instructional responsibilities and instruction. Collecting qualitative or survey data on special educators' working conditions, in the context of intervention studies, would be an efficient way of conducting this research, providing insights into how these conditions contribute to special educators' capacity to implement interventions.

Third, we were intrigued by differences in special educators' beliefs about the relative importance of their academic role. Our methods do not allow us to determine if these beliefs affected instruction. However, organizational research has found that employees' beliefs about their role are related to performance (Parker, 2007), and a handful of education studies have found that teachers' beliefs about their roles do explain important outcomes, such as students' rates of aggressive behavior (e.g., Somech & Oplatka, 2009). However, these studies were primarily conducted in Israel, and none focused on special educators. We suggest that this may be a fruitful area for future inquiry. Specifically, future research can explore whether differences in special educators' perceptions of the importance of their academic versus behavioral roles explain

variation in instructional quality, and how different role orientations develop.

Fourth, participants reported actively counteracting challenges they experienced. Special educators made it clear that they were not passive victims of challenging conditions but rather active agents shaping their working conditions. We recommend that future scholarship examines how teachers shape their own working conditions.

Finally, we suggest that researchers examine how teacher educators and school leaders can collaborate to ensure that special educators' roles in self-contained settings for students with EBD are reasonable and well supported at both pre- and in-service levels. For example, to ensure that special educators graduate from a preparation program well prepared for roles they will actually fulfill in local districts and are well supported in those roles, studies could use design-based research methods to simultaneously redesign preservice preparation and in-service roles.

Implications for Practice

School leaders are responsible for maximizing human capital resources in their schools, ensuring teachers' specialized skills are directed toward students (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014). We recommend that school leaders

- Limit extra demands. Special educators should not have to choose between extra tasks and instruction (Bettini et al., 2015).
- Protect special educators' planning time by providing skilled, safe supervision for students during planning periods (Allinder, 1996).
- Ensure special educators have opportunities to socialize with colleagues daily. Eating lunch with students may indeed be a valuable strategy for developing positive relationships and essential for student safety. However, special educators who do this still need a separate break, so they can develop collegial relationships and recoup from emotional demands of teaching students with EBD (Albrecht, Johns, Mountstevens, & Olorunda, 2009).
- Hire only skilled paraprofessionals and develop systems (time, supports) for training them (Giangreco et al., 2010).
- Ensure teachers have instructional materials for all grades and subjects they teach; instructional materials can powerfully shape instruction (Jackson & Makarin, 2016). Ensure special educators in multigrade, multisubject classes have resources for small-group instruction.
- Ensure special educators have dedicated time to collaborate with colleagues on academics and behavior, as collaboration is essential to teacher effectiveness (Kraft & Papay, 2014).

Conclusion

To address the long-standing challenges of cultivating and retaining a skilled workforce for students with EBD, teacher educators and school leaders must understand what special educators' roles entail, and coordinate their efforts to (a) prepare special educators for their actual roles in self-contained classes, and (b) create conditions that support special educators in fulfilling these roles effectively. Our findings reveal that special educators experience dissonance between their ideal roles and lived reality, and working conditions may contribute to this dissonance. To ensure students with EBD experience effective academic and behavioral instruction, the disparity between special educators' ideal roles and their reality must be better understood and systemically addressed.

Authors' Note

The authors Jun Wang, Michelle Cumming, and Jenna Kimerling have contributed equally to this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. All quotes are obtained from original transcripts. We reinserted participants' original language into our analytic synthesis, to provide readers with evidence to support our analytic conclusions. When preparing the results, we initially inserted all quotes relevant to a particular analytic point. We then selected those that most eloquently illustrated the point. Note that there are important differences in teachers' experiences, and some issues only arose for some teachers. We have endeavored to be clear, throughout, about which teachers reported particular experiences.

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