Understanding Novice Special Education Teachers' and Paraeducators' Mentorship Relationships: A Comparative Case Study

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Novice special education teachers (SETs) often report on stress and burnout in their jobs, identifying collaboration with colleagues as a factor that supports them during the first years (Belknap & Taymans, 2015). While previous research focused on teachers' support from their mentor teachers, administrators, and colleagues, in this study we examined the mentorship relationship between SETs and their classroom paraeducators. We analyzed interviews of three novice SETs who taught in a large urban school district. All participants taught in Special Day Classrooms (SDC) and worked closely with paraeducators. The findings of this comparative case study suggest that these relationships are important for teachers' assimilation in the classroom. Results show the mentorship can be bidirectional, where experienced paraeducators support the novice teacher, or where teachers take an active role in mentoring their team. In addition, findings suggest that in the absence of any mentorship, the relationship with the paraeducators becomes a burden for novice teachers as they try to navigate their new roles and duties. The paper provides recommendations for practice and future research.

Keywords: paraeducators, novice teachers, special education, mentorship

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Novice Special Education Teachers

Special education teachers (SETs) hold a complex role that requires a thorough and integrative preparation program. Research identifies an extensive knowledge base that SETs should acquire during their preservice training. In California, the Teaching Performance Expectations (TPEs) outline key aspects in the training programs and include disability-related knowledge, assessment procedures, as well as designing instruction and learning experiences for their diverse students. In addition, SETs need to be highly qualified to teach in core content areas and the general education curriculum (Brownell et al., 2010, 2019; Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2020). Given the extent of professional knowledge needed in the field, it seems that when novice SETs arrive at the field, they require proper support to navigate their role in the first year in the classroom (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

Shortage, Burnout and Attrition

For over two decades, the United States has been experiencing chronic shortage in SETs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019). The shortage is a result of an increasing number of students identified with special needs, as well as an ongoing shortage within the teaching profession across disciplines (Sutcher et al., 2019). Scholars who investigated the ongoing imbalance between supply and demand claim that increasing the number of teachers is just a small step in the process, while retaining teachers in their position is found to be critical in order to reduce the national need for teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019: Sutcher et al., 2019).

Belknap and Taymans (2015) interviewed first-year SETs regarding their experiences in school and identified that participants who felt supported in their school and thought that they were making a difference felt most resilient. Yet, isolation and a sense of not being prepared for the role were associated with less resilience (Belknap & Taymans, 2015). These findings align with other studies from the last two decades and show that collaborative work within school staff was found to reduce burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Cipriano et al., 2016; Conley & You, 2017; Gersten et al., 2001). Mentorship, when a veteran teacher was assigned to guide novice ones through their first year(s), was found to be an effective support system for novices, especially when the mentee and mentor shared similar roles or teaching areas (Billingsley et al.,

2009; Whitaker, 2000). Yet in many schools, novice SETs are mentored by general education teachers, which was found to be less effective (Whitaker, 2000).

But for most SETs, collaboration is not limited to only working with other teachers. It also happens within the classroom with their special education paraeducators (SEPs). Meanwhile, there is limited literature that addresses the relationship between SETs and SEPs and its role in the experiences of novice SETs. The current study aims to address this gap. While viewing collaboration as an important tool to reduce burnout, we explore whether the presence of aides in the classroom provides the teachers with the much-needed support, or rather increases burnout due to the need to train and supervise the assistants. Since SETs and SEPs share responsibilities and work closely in the classroom, their roles are interwoven and interdependent. They work together towards shared goals, but with a significant gap in knowledge and resources to address students' needs.

Special Education Paraeducators

SEPs are teachers' assistants or one-on-one assistants who work with students with special needs. They hold a unique role in supporting students with various disabilities in the areas of social skills, academic instruction, behavioral-emotional support, and personal care (Giangreco et al., 2010**).** According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018) approximately 488,200 paraeducators were reported to serve children with disabilities in 2016. The federal act of No Child Left Behind of 2001 (NCLB) defined key aspects in the hiring procedures and role definition of paraeducators. Entering this role requires candidates to have at least forty-eight college credits or other postsecondary education or an associate degree (e.g., A.A.), with some states opening a path for individuals with high school diploma. In addition, they are authorized to perform a limited number of roles, both instructional and non-instructional, all under the supervision of a credentialed teacher. Fourteen years after NCLB, the Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) introduced the new term *paraeducators*, recognizing them as a critical voice in educational decision making and professional development.

Roles of SEPs

Research that examines the work of SEPs points out inappropriate work assignments for SEPs and the lack of supervision on their assigned tasks (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). In doing this,

not only do schools fail to comply with regulations but also leave the SEPs to work with minimal support or assistance in their challenging profession. Carter et al. (2009) surveyed 313 paraeducators supporting students with disabilities examining their knowledge, tasks, and need for further training. The respondents reported moderate levels of need for additional training on all knowledge standards. They also outlined the tasks they were performing daily or weekly, with one-on-one instruction, facilitating social relationships, instructional support in small groups, implementing behavior management programs, and clerical work among the most frequently reported tasks. In a literature review, Giangreco et al. (2010) described the growing role of instruction in the work of paraeducators. They identified several studies that describe paraeducators holding increased responsibility for direct instructional support of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). A descriptive analysis from a Midwestern state survey regarding the role, responsibilities, and concerns of paraeducators showed that SEPs reported insufficient support or training to do the tasks they are required to do (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). Respondents noted three primary roles they held: behavioral and social support, implementing teacher-planned instruction, and student supervision.

Respect and Acknowledgment from Teachers

With the roles and responsibilities of SEPs varying greatly in design and definition from school to school, defining their status among other educators in the schools appears to be challenging throughout all settings. SEPs indicate a need to feel respected by school personnel, students, and parents (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017). A literature review by Giangreco et al. (2010) brought forth that SEPs reported feeling neither respected nor valued as members of school community. Receiving acknowledgment for their work was associated with SEPs' effective work and job satisfaction. Fisher and Pleasants (2012) found that 40% of the respondents reported a lack of respect and acknowledgment.

SEPs play critical roles in the education of students with IEPs and are essential members of the special education (SPED) team (Carter et al., 2009; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). Despite their importance, their work is associated with a lack of supervision, ambiguity in definitions of their roles and responsibilities, and limited respect from colleagues (Giangreco et al., 2001).

Collaborative work of SETs with SEPs

With the extensive roles of SEPs, there is a great need for support, guidance, and supervision. However, research identifies several barriers including SETs' lack of leadership training, scarcity of role definitions, and absence of clear mentoring relationships. Teacher education programs seem to fail in addressing leadership roles during the teacher training period (Douglas et al., 2016; Yates et al., 2020; Sobeck et al., 2020). Teachers indicate not having sufficient training and resources to supervise the team of paraeducators, as well as not having any official training on team management or supervision skills overall (Douglas et al., 2016). In a national survey of teacher educators, Sobeck et al. (2020) found that although participants indicated the importance of such content in the preservice training, over a third of participants reported that there was no coursework in teacher preparation programs that focused on working with SEPs. In fact, the limited teacher training on the collaboration with SEPs as reported by teachers is striking given the importance of these relationships.

An additional tier of complexity for SETs-SEPs relationships is the challenge of providing feedback to a team member with whom one works closely and shares responsibilities. Teachers admit they avoid supervising and providing feedback to paraeducators since they do not want to be confrontational (Biggs et al., 2016). Teachers emphasize the importance of making paraeducators feel part of a team and the need to create teamwork in the classroom; they mention key factors for creating such a relationship: treating paraeducators as equal, showing appreciation, and ensuring good communication (Douglas et al., 2016).

Biggs et al. (2016) interviewed SETs regarding their work assignments related to SEPs. Teachers in their study discussed the importance of these relationships for students' outcomes and beyond. They mentioned that their proficiency, hence their organization skills and knowledge, relates to their overall effectiveness and relationship with paraeducators. Also, teachers who demonstrated stronger classroom management and organizational skills had better management skills with their SEPs. Additionally, teachers reported that the lack of time and resources prevented them from providing proper training to SEPs (Biggs et al., 2016).

A study by Breton (2010) surveyed 260 SEPs. The findings indicated that 39.5% of participants were never evaluated by SETs. Over a quarter of SEPs indicated that they either

never received consultation or that they did, and it was unsatisfactory. More than 60% of respondents reported consulting with SETs at least on a weekly basis, and 15.9% reported never consulting with teachers. Research focused on the outcomes of SEPs training in various skills, such as embedding teacher-planned instruction, social interaction, and implementing social stories, indicated positive results that were beneficial for students and educators (Giangreco et al., 2010). While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA, 2004) requires states to ensure proper training and supervision, the requirement is not fully complied with. Several states have developed extensive programs supporting paraeducators and certification programs, while others use unclear standards (Breton, 2010).

Impact of Relationship Between SETs and SEPs

The literature that describes the tight relationships between SETs and SEPs strengthens the notion that these relationships are important and have a great effect on all team members' performance. Yet, it is likely that teachers perceive the supervision roles as additional workload and tasks. Chopra et al. (2011) examined paraeducator-teacher relationship and paraeducator career development. Through interviews of SETs and SEPs they identified that effective supervision by teachers is the most important factor of SEPs' performance, and the success of SETs and SEPs in their work is associated with the quality of their relationship. However, the burden SETs report about their workloads is linked to burnout and attrition (Kaff, 2004). Therefore, adding training and evaluating of paraeducators to teachers' responsibilities may only heighten their job-related stress. While collaborative work reduces teachers' burnout, unmanageable workloads have the opposite effect. SETs and SEPs are required to work closely, providing teachers with additional responsibility as well as with potential collaborative support. It might be that the extensive need to support and train paraeducators adds up to greater workload for teachers increasing their emotional exhaustion (Bettini et al., 2017).

Purpose of the Study

Existing literature describes the challenges novice SETs encounter as they enter the profession and the role of mentorship and collaboration in teachers' retention. There is a growing body of research on the challenges SETs encounter in their work with SEPs. The intersection of these two fields has not yet been addressed, which is the aim of the current

study. The focus of this inquiry is to understand how beginning SETs conceptualize mentorship in their relationships with SEPs. This exploratory qualitative comparative case study analyzes three cases of novice SETs who work with SEPs. It aims to explore how these teachers discuss and reflect on the mentorship relationship with their paraeducators and the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are SETs' perceptions of the support they receive during their first year in the profession?
2. How do novice SETs describe their relationship with their paraeducators?
3. How do novice SETs describe the delegation of roles in the classroom?

Methods

This study is a part of a larger research project on the collaboration of novice SETs and SEPs. The emphasis of the current project is on identifying patterns of mentoring relationships and their indicators. We chose three participants from the larger sample that most clearly represent these patterns. The *comparative case study* method serves this purpose as this method aims to identify how similar situations lead to different outcomes with the "understanding and incorporation of the perspectives of social actors in the study" (Barlett & Vavrus, 2016, p. 39).

Sample

We used purposeful recruitment for the study, inviting recent graduates from a university-based teacher education program to participate in the study. The second author reached out with an informational email to potential participants, and those who showed interest in participating received further details. The first author conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with beginning SETs that hold a preliminary teaching credential and have been teaching for less than five years. Participants in the study taught in a Special Day Class (SDC) setting and worked in urban elementary public schools. The schools had a high proportion of Hispanic students and students coming from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (California School Dashboard, 2020). Table 1 provides the schools' demographics. We chose the three participant cases to include in this manuscript to define and exemplify

three patterns of teacher-paraeducator relationships and their implications for novice teachers' experiences. Table 2 provides descriptive information on participants using pseudonyms.

Table 1

Schools' characteristics

	School Level	Number of students	Student with SPED services	Socioeconomically disadvantaged	School demographics
Mariana	K-5	744	17.3%	94.9%	94.4% Hispanic, 1.6% African American, 2.6% white.
Renata	K-5	374	13.1%	49.5%	44.75% Hispanic, 9.1% African American, 23.8% white, 5.1% Asian
Rebeca	K-5	473	12.1%	70.6%	98% Hispanic, 1% white, 1% other

Note. Reflects data from 2018-2019 school year, adapted from the California School Dashboard (https://www.caschooldashboard.org/)

Table 2

Description of the participants

	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Number of Years Teaching	Previous Profession	Current Position	Number of paraeducators in the classroom
Mariana	35	Hispanic	1	Nanny	SDC K-2	1 classroom aide
Renata	45	Hispanic	2	Tutor	SDC K-2	1 classroom aide + 4 one on ones
Rebeca	32	Hispanic	2	Paraeducator	SDC Mod-Severe K-2	2 classroom aides, 3 one on ones.

Procedure

Following the recruitment stages, we conducted remote interviews via Zoom. The first author met with each participant once, and the interview length ranged between 45-65 minutes. Participants were notified of their rights prior to scheduling the interview and verbally at the beginning of the interview. Interviews were transcribed by the first author and reviewed

by the second author. Throughout the research stages we followed the quality indicators for qualitative studies recommended by Brantlinger et al. (2005). We increased methodological credibility by emailing the participants follow-up questions for clarification. In addition, we used collaborative work strategies throughout the data collection and analysis stages to address quality indicators and accurate interpretation of the data. The research was reviewed by the university's Office of the Human Research Protection Program and was certified as exempt from IRB review.

Analysis

The data analysis of the current study occurred in a continuum of the larger data set analysis. As the research team discussed and revised the findings, we identified three distinct models of mentorship as portrayed by participants. In this manuscript we included the three cases that most clearly represent these models; each of the identified models represents the direction, or lack of it, in the teacher-paraeducator relationship. While traditionally, researchers view SETs as the knowledgeable supervisor, we challenge the perception and present additional models. While the omitted interviews fit into the three models, they were not included due to saturation of the presented data. We provide an overview of these three cases in Figure 1.

Guided by the principles of a qualitative comparative case study (Barlett & Vavrus, 2016), the analysis took a horizontal comparison approach which allowed us to compare the cases considering that each participant has a separate experience and context. The method enables to retain a holistic perspective on participants' experiences without the need to seek thematical similarities (Yin, 2012). We describe the three models through the analysis of three a-priori themes, that were found and described in prior research: relationship with paraeducators, delegation of roles, and teachers' support sources. Our semi-structured interviews invited participants to reflect on these themes, and they were equally represented in the data.

Findings

Our data and model design reveal divergence and bidirectionality in the mentorship relationship between SETs and SEPs. It emphasizes the importance of mentorship as a key tool in sustaining strong collaboration and mutual growth. But at the same time, the model points

out that mentorship is mutual. In the context of high teacher burnout, with depleted SETs leaving the classrooms at times abruptly and new SETs coming on board, the SEPs team holds professional knowledge and understanding of specific school site culture to support the novice SETs.

Figure 1

Overview of Participants

Mariana- Mariana's life dream was to become an educator. As an undocumented young woman, she was able to fulfil her dream only after she was awarded a credential. In her first year teaching, Mariana teaches in a mild-moderate SDC classroom grades TK-2. She describes her close bond with her veteran paraeducator, an asset, with whom she built a partnership and mutual support.

Renata- Following several years as a tutor in a Regional Center Program, Renata wished to become a school counselor. When she could not access the counseling program, the university offered her to join the credential program and she took the opportunity. She teaches a SDC classroom of K-2 students with extended support needs. Renata describes the shift in her relationship with her team of paraeducators. In her first weeks, she received a lot of support from her team and relied on their guidance in her teaching. Now, Renata describes her strong mentorship relationship with her paraeducators. She pays attention to their individual growth and needs, and supports their role as team-players, maintaining the mentorship and collaboration through weekly group and individual meetings.

Rebeca- Served as a classroom aide for 4 years, where she was inspired to pursue a teaching credential. She then got a position at the same school where she previously worked. Rebeca teaches second grade SDC with students with extended support needs. Rebecca describes her struggles to form relationship with her paraeducators. On the one hand, she wants them to show dedication and initiative in their work but at the same time, she struggles to define her role as a mentor or a leader of the team. This ambiguity of the relationship and lack of mentorship seem to create tension and conflict between the adults in the classroom.

Each of the case studies we discuss exemplifies one of the models of the mentorship relationship. Mariana described how her paraeducator supported her and served as her best ally in her new role. Renata emphasized her own strong leadership skills to lead her team and mentor her paraeducators. And lastly, Rebeca described the absence of any mentorship relationship, where everyone was expected to perform at their best which led to ambiguity and tension within the team.

In this section we discuss three a-priori themes that were introduced in the interview, and their implication in each one of the mentorship models. These three themes align with the research questions: support sources for novice teachers, relationship with SEPs, and delegation of roles.

Theme 1: Support Sources for Novice Teachers

During the five-year induction period, when novice teachers are clearing their credentials, schools and districts often provide them with support sources such as mentors or coaches. The teachers we interviewed expressed their disappointment with the mentorship process and sought alternatives, reporting the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the mentorship support t they received. Rebeca described how her principal reacted when she reached out for support, "I love my principal, she is great but, even when I have reached out to her, she was kind of like, 'Oh, welcome to teaching!' That's what it is!" Rebeca's principal emphasized that struggling was an inevitable part of teaching and that she had to deal with this on her own. Mariana also expressed disappointment with the assigned support she had. She described the unfortunate gap between promises she was given prior to entering the classroom and what she ended up receiving:

> Personally, I feel that at the beginning of my first year I was told "you are going to get support for this or for that." But when I was actually in it, trying to learn all the different roles, the stress was a lot and I felt like I was learning. But the support that I was expecting was not there. There is this coach that was also assigned to help me. She was always busy with all her responsibilities from her job, so I was like: ok, everyone is busy, what do I do now? I still need help.

Similarly, Renata described feeling disappointed from the lack of resources to support her, "Honestly, they just threw me in that classroom. There was no shadowing of anybody else which I would have loved to be able to see other teachers, how their all day looks, how they deal with each component." Each of the participants mentioned this void in support during the first critical year of their work. While they were eager to learn from veteran teachers, the schools they worked in struggled to provide fulfilling mentorship relationships. Mariana and Renata filled this void with their relationship with their paraeducators. Renata told us:

> I felt overwhelmed in my first weeks, and I could not have done it without the aides that were very knowledgeable and very helpful. I don't know, maybe that's why so many teachers quit because they don't have a lot of support in the beginning.

Renata's first allies in the school were her paraeducators; they were familiar with the students and the school personnel and provided her the initial guidance as she was navigating her new role.

Theme 2: Relationship With SEPs

When discussing their relationship with the paraeducators, our participants characterized their aides in two opposite directions: as an asset or as a burden to their work. Mariana and Renata, who perceived their paraeducators as an asset, described their relationships as featuring professional support and mentorship as well as friendship. For example, Mariana pointed out that she learned from her instructional aide for the benefit of the students:

> I feel like I have been learning from him too. For example, when the kids are having a problem between them and they are at his table or he is right there reading a book and he handles them, and I'm thinking, "Ok, that was a good idea, I'm going to try that next time."

Mariana acknowledged the vast experience of her paraeducator and accepted the fact that she could learn from him and his practice. This acknowledgment helped facilitate a relationship that benefited all sides. In addition to the students who benefitted from the expertise of all the adults in the classroom, as the novice teacher, Mariana found a close ally and mentor in her aide. The veteran paraeducator benefitted from respect, acknowledgment of his knowledge and skills, and collaboration with the classroom teacher.

Renata also built fruitful relationships with her paraeducators. She shared that these relationships are beyond schoolwork and became personal in a very short time:

> I feel that, we have to form some type of relationship to be open and because it's better than just having a working relationship where it's dry and you don't want to talk about nothing personal. I want to show them that I do see them as people, and I care about

their situations as well. Honestly, I did invite a couple of my aides to my wedding. They

are super helpful, and I really was appreciative, so I invited them.

Renata's case emphasizes the closeness between paraeducators and teachers. Working

closely on a daily basis has the potential to form strong, personal bonds. Yet, this is not the case

for all teachers. Rebeca described her relationship with her paraeducators in different colors.

She had been struggling to create mentorship relationship with her paraeducators as well as

accept their guidance.

I have a lot of aides in my class, which makes it sound like it is easier sometimes, but no,

I feel it's too many people in my class. I think that has been the biggest stress, even

more than the kids, more than the work, more than anything. Just kind of handling

those relationships in the classroom.

Rebeca perceived her paraeducators as a burden. They created additional unwanted

work and became a major stressor for her during the first year of teaching, all while she was

trying to define her role in the classroom. Rebecca's words challenge the common conception

that having aides in the classroom means having additional support for the students and

teachers. While this might be the case for some, it is also an additional workload and leadership

role for the teacher in place. Rebeca described her disappointment with the relationships in the

classroom, and she outlined her vision and hope for her classroom:

I want it to be an enjoyable place to work. I want it to be so we can have a conversation

and we could talk and not be so gloomy and serious. I want to find that balance; how

can I talk with them but still have it be an enjoyable place to be?

While her hope was to create a friendly work environment, Rebeca struggled to find her

voice as a mentor and leader in the classroom. Her description revealed that, although well

intended, it is possible that she did not have the tools to supervise and manage a team of

paraeducators. And with the absence of proper mentorship, she struggled to find her voice as a

leader.

Theme 3: Delegation of Roles

A key aspect of collaborative work is the delegation of roles among the members of the

team (French, 2001). The teachers in our sample addressed this issue and discussed their own

roles, the roles of paraeducators, and the allocation of roles among multiple aides. Renata, who actively mentored her paraeducators, reported having a clear vision and an action plan for her team:

> In order for me to have an effective team, it's a lot of direction, I had to make a matrix, make clear the expectations. We also have weekly teacher meetings and I also have bi-weekly meetings with them just to go over what is working and what is not working; just to make sure that we are working as a team and that everything is running smoothly.

> Renata accepted her role as the leader and mentor of her paraeducators. She navigated the team dynamics by holding meetings where she received updates on the students' work and the paraeducators' needs. These meetings were essential for her to not only manage the team, but also to follow up on her students' work since a lot of it was done by the paraeducators. She described the importance of these meetings, "Without having a system it would have been harder. Having those meetings is so important because that's how you know what's going on."

> Mariana described a different approach to delegating roles. She saw her work with her paraeducator as a partnership where all had an equal voice to share. By acknowledging her paraeducator's knowledge and experience, she perceived the two as a team working collaboratively towards a shared goal.

> Initially, I had a lot of questions. What do we do if this happens? What do we do about that? And he would sometimes tell me what the previous teacher did. I would want him to tell me stuff like that for reference, just to know that what I was doing was not weird.

> Mariana welcomed her paraeducator's experience as an asset to her growth and to the students' success. Given her lack of confidence as a beginning teacher, she felt reassured having an experienced educator in class, validating her decisions and professional knowledge.

> Rebeca discussed the roles in her classroom with much complexity and tension. This was common when she assigned roles to paraeducators and when paraeducators' expectations differed from hers. This complex net of expectations along with a lack of clear mentorship relationships, often caused tension and disappointment. In the following quote, Rebeca described a conflict with her paraeducator where her aide expected Rebeca to act differently during a conflict:

It's kind of a fight over job duties, what's expected from both me and her. She (the paraeducator) sees it as I am the teacher, I am supposed to be coming in. But for me, if the student is on the floor and not hurting anyone, that's not a big thing to me.

Rebeca also described situations of conflict over roles and duties among several paraeducators in her classroom. She talked about the times when the aides reached out to her to step in, but she felt that was not her place to intervene. For example, in the following quote Rebeca depicted a situation in which a paraeducator complained that another aide was taking long breaks, "They are trying to get me to get on them, and it's like no, no, no. You guys aren't little; I'm not going to be watching your breaks by the second." These two quotes from Rebeca emphasize the ambiguity in her own place in the classroom. Paraeducators expected her to take a leadership role, yet she chose to avoid it. The same ambiguity infiltrated the job duties of the paraeducators and caused conflicts. Rebeca described how the paraeducators argued over each other's responsibilities as well:

We had a conflict between the aides because the interpreter claimed that she was there only to interpret. It has been unclear what her job duties were, and there were different people expecting her to do things that she wasn't willing to do, so they included me in it.

Rebeca hoped to avoid conflicts around roles and job duties, yet the issue came up multiple times during her interview. Job assignments are essential to effective teamwork, and we learned that in its absence and the absence of supportive relationships, the team does not properly function, which may have ramifications for students' performance.

Discussion

Novice SETs make a vulnerable population often susceptible to high attrition and burnout (Conley & You, 2017). Previous research attributed these challenges to insufficient collaboration, high stress levels, and unmanageable workloads (Brunsting et al., 2014; Cipriano et al., 2016; Conley & You, 2017). These challenges are amplified in urban schools, characterized by diverse student population and inferior funding and resources (Bettini & Park, 2017). In the current research, we interviewed novice teachers, who work in an urban school district, about their daily experiences as supervisors of paraeducators. The analysis detected

three multi-direction mentorship relationships that were analyzed using three a-priori themes. The present study extends the field's understanding of SETs' experiences in their first years in the profession, their support systems, and the challenges and gains in mentorship relationship with their paraeducators.

Between Loneliness and Friendship

Participants unanimously reported their hopes for greater support as they were taking their first steps as teachers. All mentioned their assigned mentors or coaches from the school or district, but these services fell short and did not provide the support they were supposed to provide. This gap between what looks like support "on paper" but does not translate to one was implied by Whitaker (2000) who surveyed first-year SETs. Whitaker's study showed that for mentoring programs to succeed, there are several critical components: consistency of support, availability, and personal and professional characteristics. Billingsley et al. (2009) elaborated on the purpose of these support assignments as a response to what is known as a common struggle of novice teachers in their first years in the profession. In the absence of formal support, some of our teacher participants found professional support and friendship with their paraeducators. These meaningful relationships are described in previous literature (Biggs et al., 2016) but the magnitude of support, as described by teachers in our case studies, was not yet reported. Teachers who established a mentorship with their SEPs perceived them as allies, coaches, and friends. They formed relationships that fulfilled the teachers' need for support and guidance. In fact, teachers in our sample who perceived their paraeducators as allies attributed most of their knowledge and success in the first year to this collaboration. But in the absence of a mentorship relationship, the supportive model does not exist. The novice teacher and the SEPs team work individually, lacking collaboration and much needed guidance.

Between Supporters and Stressors

Our models show that when a SET-SEP mentorship relationship exists, teachers see their paraeducators as their biggest supporters, yet the absence of such a relationship makes SEPs' presence a burden and a source of stress and negativity for the SETs. The collaborative aspect was recorded in earlier literature (Biggs et al., 2016; Chopra et al., 2011; Douglas et al., 2016) where the SPED team was described as a supportive united entity. Although we identified this

unity in our mentorship models, we also recognized its absence as an agent of stress, burden, and despair. In her interview, Rebeca attributed this to the presence of different personalities in the classroom and her lack of knowledge and preparation for the leadership role. Indeed, the lack of training is common in preparation programs. Sobeck et al. (2020) found that preservice preparation programs do not address these needs of teachers due to a lack of resources, guidelines, and time. This vacuum in teacher preparation programs emphasizes the need for districts and schools to step in and take the lead on supporting their teachers in taking on these leadership roles.

Deciding on Roles

A significant part of a SET role as a team leader is to assign roles to the educators in the classroom. Our participants indicated that as novices they experienced a lack of confidence when it came to delegating roles. Yet avoiding delegation of roles results in potential damage to the delicate relationship between the SEP and SET. Our models of mentorship show that teachers who lead their team confidently, or create a strong bond with their paraeducators, benefit from their paraeducators' previous experiences. Existing literature features conflicting findings on this topic. Zobell and Hwang (2020) reported that paraeducators feel they have an adequate understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Other studies found that paraeducators report the importance of teachers' leadership and guidance on roles in order to be efficient and not feel alone (Biggs et al., 2016; Mason et al., 2020). Teachers' delegation of roles as well as paraeducators' understanding and training in their responsibilities continue to be a critical component of the relationships between the adults in the classroom.

Conclusion

The work of SETs and SEPs occupied researchers in the area of special education with a focus predominantly on roles and training. The current study sheds light on unfamiliar territory- the relationships between the adults in the classroom led by novice SETs. The interviews with SETs in our study reflect the importance of these mentorship relationships and their determinant aspect on teachers' resilience in the profession. We showed that, despite the common perception, the presence of SEPs in the classroom can elevate novice teachers' stress levels and workload. In addition, our findings challenged the unidirectionality of leadership in

the classrooms and in SET-SEP relationships. Our findings may dismiss the common assumption that teachers solely train and supervise the SEPs. This study showed that mentorship is bidirectional, where SEPs can act as significant colleagues and mentors of novice teachers as the latter enter the profession.

Future research should address the nature and directionality of relationships in the classrooms by including a broader sample and expanding the settings to other urban and suburban areas. Additionally, in exploring relationships, there is a need to add the SEPs' perspective on working with novice teachers, and the way they experience the work with these educators. The current findings raise the need to revisit the supportive functions for novice teachers, such as mentors, and examine the ways in which schools and districts can ensure high quality support for SETs and SEPs.

Limitations

The current work is a small-scale qualitative study that showcases the findings from three case studies. As we begin to explore the findings, we acknowledge the study's limited transferability. The results should be interpreted with care, as we might find substantial differences between districts in the services and mentorship provided to novice SETs. The current research aims to understand the relationship through the voices of teachers, and the absence of the paraeducators' perspective creates additional limitation.

Implications for practice

This research brings the unique perspectives of beginning SETs regarding various work aspects with paraeducators. We recommend that administrators in the area of special education revisit the common perception that having many adults in the classroom provides the intended support for the teacher. Since that may not always be the case, administrators should support novice SETs and their SEPs by communicating their expectations for the team members. In addition, teacher education programs must address this component of SETs' work and provide candidates with appropriate tools and recommendations necessary to establish a productive team. As seen in our collaborative models, there is much potential in the mentorship relationships between novice SETs and SEPs, and both the adults and students in the classroom can benefit from them.

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