


Working Conditions and Special Educators' Reading Instruction for Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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Abstract

Working conditions may be an important lever to support special educators' reading instruction for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Thus, we explored how working conditions relate to the quality of special educators' reading instruction in upper-elementary, self-contained classes for students with EBD. Using mixed methods to examine video observations of reading instruction and varied data sources on working conditions, we found that special educators who provided stronger instruction had a partner coleading their program, and consistent paraprofessionals, with time and support for training. Partners and paraprofessionals, together, protected special educators' instruction time. Other conditions (i.e., material resources, role differentiation, role conceptions, planning time) emerged as potentially important, but evidence was less robust. Results indicate partners and paraprofessionals may be important forms of collegial support. These findings have important implications for improving the quality of instruction in self-contained settings for students with EBD.

Working conditions—the demands on teachers and the resources provided to meet demands (Bettini et al., 2020)—may be an important lever by which leaders could support special education teachers' (SETs') efforts to provide effective instruction. Yet, few studies have examined how working conditions shape SETs' instruction (Bettini et al., 2016).

Understanding how working conditions shape SETs' instruction is especially important for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD; Bettini et al., 2017). Compared with other students with disabilities, students with EBD have higher risk for poor outcomes (e.g., dropout, incarceration; Wagner, 2014). Nationally, about 33% of students identified with EBD are placed in self-contained settings (Office of Special Education Programs, 2019), including those with the most substantial needs (Lane et al., 2005). These settings are intended to ensure student

safety while providing intensive interventions and access to general education curricula (Bettini et al., 2017).

On average, students with EBD have significant reading difficulties, and their reading skills grow slowly compared with students without disabilities, requiring highly effective reading instruction (Wanzek et al., 2014). Highly effective instruction is related to both SETs' interactions with and responsiveness to students and how they structure the class for learning (Garwood et al., 2020). Extant

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research indicates that for students with EBD, reading instruction should be explicit, systematic, and predictable (Campbell et al., 2018). SETs should elicit frequent student–teacher interactions (e.g., opportunities to respond) and provide carefully sequenced practice opportunities, focused on common misunderstandings (Campbell et al., 2018). SETs must integrate proactive, positive behavior supports into instruction (Garwood et al., 2020); due to students’ significant difficulties with self-regulation (Cumming et al., 2019), strong instruction for students with EBD must use practices to increase engagement and foster behavior regulation (Benner et al., 2010). This is especially important in elementary grades, when students’ skills may be more amenable to intervention (McKenna et al., 2019), and in self-contained settings, which serve students whose academic and behavioral needs are complex and intertwined (Garwood et al., 2017; Lane et al., 2005).

Of great concern, studies of self-contained settings for students with EBD have consistently identified substantial problems with both SETs’ instructional quality (e.g., Levy & Vaughn, 2002; Maggin et al., 2011) and their working conditions (e.g., O’Brien et al., 2019). However, few studies have examined how working conditions relate to SETs’ instructional quality (Bettini et al., 2016). Such research could provide important insights into how to better support these SETs in providing strong reading instruction. This is especially important given students’ reading difficulties (Wanzek et al., 2014), the crucial role reading plays in long-term outcomes (McLaughlin et al., 2014), and these students’ high risk for poor long-term outcomes (Wagner, 2014). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how SETs’ working conditions relate to the quality of reading instruction in self-contained classes for students with EBD.

Conceptual Foundations

In a systematic review, Bettini et al. (2016) found only eight studies of how working conditions relate to SETs’ instructional quality (measured by observations) or effectiveness (measured by student achievement). In most

of these studies, working conditions emerged as salient to instruction in inductive analysis; thus, extant research supported hypotheses but not substantiated conclusions. Bettini et al. (2016) synthesized these studies with studies of general educators to formulate a conceptual framework positing: (a) SETs’ capacity to provide strong instruction depends on opportunities afforded by working conditions, specifically, opportunities to learn, plan, and teach; and (b) working conditions interact to shape instruction.

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Opportunities to Learn, Plan, and Teach

Bettini et al. (2016) posited SETs’ instructional quality may be shaped by opportunities to (a) learn effective practices, (b) plan to integrate those practices into instruction, and (c) teach, enacting those practices. These opportunities depend on working conditions: (a) planning time, (b) curricular resources, (c) instructional time, (d) instructional grouping, (e) collegial support, (f) professional development (PD), (g) administrative support, and (h) school culture. In a later review of SETs’ working conditions in self-contained settings for students with EBD, Bettini et al. (2017) added paraprofessional support to this framework, based on research indicating the importance of paraprofessional support for these SETs. Opportunities to learn, plan, and teach can be shaped by multiple conditions; for example, SETs may learn from curricular resources (Siuty et al., 2018), PD (Leko et al., 2018), and colleagues (Sun et al., 2017). Similarly, one condition may shape several opportunities; for example, curricular resources may provide opportunities to learn and plan by making planning time more efficient (Bettini et al., 2016).

Limited research indicates whether or how these conditions shape SETs’ instruction, but some conditions have robust evidentiary support from research with general educators

(Bettini et al., 2016). Strong evidence indicates curricular resources shape instruction, as intervention studies indicate curricular materials can significantly improve general educators' instructional effectiveness (Jackson & Makarin, 2016). Strong correlational evidence also supports the importance of administrative support for instruction; analyses of administrative data sets indicate that in schools where teachers perceive administrators as more supportive, students make stronger gains (e.g., S. Johnson et al., 2012), while studies of SETs consistently indicate they are more likely to plan to stay when they report strong administrative support (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Evidence of the importance of school culture and collegial support is also strong: Analyses of administrative data sets indicate teachers become more effective when they work in positive, collaborative cultures (e.g., Ronfeldt et al., 2015), and SETs report feeling better able to meet student needs in schools with cultures of collective responsibility (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Evidence of the importance of PD, instructional grouping, and instructional time is strong, with caveats. Ample research indicates well-designed PD can improve teachers' instruction (Kennedy, 2016), but PD outside of research tends to be of lower quality (Hill, 2009); however, in one study, naturally occurring PD was associated with SETs' self-reported instructional foci (Leko et al., 2018). Robust research indicates reading intervention in early elementary is more effective when SETs have more time with small groups of students who share instructional needs (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007), but the importance of these conditions in older grades is less clear.

Planning time has seldom been studied (Bettini et al., 2016). SETs report it is essential, and several studies found that without planning time, SETs may use instructional time to plan, reducing instructional time (e.g., Vannest et al., 2010). However, Allinder (1996) conducted the only study examining how it relates to instruction, finding that SETs who rated planning time as adequate were more likely to implement a newly learned practice with fidelity than those who rated it inadequate. No studies have examined how paraprofessionals relate to SETs' instruction,

but extant studies indicate their importance for SETs' intent to stay (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Working Conditions Interact With One Another

Working conditions likely interact with one another in complex ways (Bettini et al., 2016). For example, SETs with less planning time may need more curricular resources, as they have less time to find or create materials. Similarly, administrative support may underlie other conditions, as administrators can structure the school to facilitate SETs' work. Indeed, studies of SETs' intent to stay confirm that working conditions interact with one another (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). For example, Bettini et al. (2020) found SETs with stronger curricular resources rated planning time as more adequate, likely because they could spend less time finding or creating materials, and administrative support predicted ratings of other conditions.

Working Conditions for SETs Serving Students With EBD in Self-Contained Settings. Understanding how working conditions shape SETs' instruction for students with EBD could have important implications, providing strategies to better support SETs' instruction for these students. Many studies have examined the working conditions SETs experience in self-contained settings for students with EBD (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2019), but to our knowledge, only one has examined how working conditions relate to these SETs' instruction. Cumming et al. (2020) analyzed a national survey of SETs teaching students with EBD in self-contained classes. They found SETs who reported stronger curricular resources and more planning time were more likely to report using effective practices (e.g., praise). Other conditions (e.g., administrative support) were unrelated. This study validated some aspects of Bettini et al.'s (2016) conceptual framework for these SETs and raised questions about others. However, it is limited by reliance on self-report, which may be subject to self-report biases and which depends on SETs' capacity to accurately assess their instruction. Studies with external evaluations of instruction are needed.

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Research Questions

Extant research clearly indicates that working conditions shape teachers' capacity to provide effective instruction (e.g., S. Johnson et al., 2012) and that SETs' working conditions in self-contained classes for students with EBD are often poor (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2019). Understanding working conditions that most powerfully shape SETs' reading instructional quality may provide crucial insight into how to improve instruction for students with EBD. Thus, we first examined the following subquestions: (1) How does the quality of SETs' reading instruction vary across sites? and (2) How do SETs' working conditions vary across sites? We then examined the relationship between the answers to these subquestions to address our primary research question: How do special educators' working conditions relate to the quality of their reading instruction for students with EBD in self-contained classes?

Method

Because prior research supports tentative hypotheses, not firm conclusions (Bettini et al., 2016), and has included few inductive studies of SETs serving students with EBD (Bettini et al., 2017), we deemed a mixed-methods design appropriate for elaborating Bettini et al.'s (2016) conceptual framework to better understand how working conditions may be shaping instructional quality for these SETs. Varied data sources addressed distinct, interrelated aspects of our inquiry, each reciprocally elaborating and clarifying findings from the other (R. Johnson, 2012).

We approached the study from a dialectical pluralist epistemological paradigm (R. Johnson, 2012); founded in pluralist ontology, this perspective assumes "many kinds of reality . . . are important" (p. 752), including objec-

tive and subjective truths. As such, data collected from varied epistemological paradigms can yield valuable insights and more holistic understandings than data collected solely from one perspective (R. Johnson, 2012). For our purposes, etic data on instructional quality were needed to evaluate instruction, and insider perspectives on working conditions were needed to understand how these conditions shape instruction. Thus, we relied on observations to examine instruction and qualitative data from both emic (i.e., interviews) and etic (i.e., field notes, curriculum and personnel survey) perspectives to examine working conditions.

Participants and Context

Using purposive sampling (Patton, 1990), we selected seven SETs from six public schools in one state (Appendix A in the online supplement). We aimed for homogeneity regarding grades (upper elementary), service delivery (self-contained), and disability categories (EBD), as these could relate to differences how working conditions shape instruction. All SETs taught in self-contained classes for students with EBD in neighborhood schools (not therapeutic or alternative schools). All identified as White women. They reported 3 to 23 years of teaching experience (1–6 years in their current schools). All held bachelor's degrees and were certified in special education; all held or were earning master's degrees. Most were responsible for a single class. Fiona and Greta co-taught a single class, both as teachers of record.

Of note, all settings were self-contained, but they enacted this model differently. Iris's and Hannah's students spent almost all their time in special education; most students left only to attend lunch and specials (e.g., music), together as a class, and two or three students (out of nine or 10) were preparing to exit the program and went to general education for one or two periods a day on their own. Amelia's, Betty's, Eve's, and Fiona and Greta's programs were more focused on inclusion in general education. Their students were assigned a general education homeroom, with whom they attended specials and lunch (such that students' schedules differed from

one another). SETs in these programs were trying to increase all students' time in general education. Greta explained,

Usually the student will start in our room . . . a self-contained classroom, until they're able to safely and effectively be included and we'll start bits and pieces including them slowly and . . . then eventually fade the support. . . . Typically most of the students do start here full-time . . . and then we find parts of the day that are most successful . . . and then build on that.

Paraprofessionals accompanied students to general education. These programs aimed for flexibility, so students could stay in the self-contained class as needed (see Bettini et al., in revision, for further explanation). All SETs provided reading instruction in separate settings; none co-taught or pushed in to general education. Of note, consistent with broader trends (Grindal et al., 2019), the four inclusion-focused programs were predominantly White and affluent, whereas the traditional self-contained programs were in high-poverty schools serving more students of color.

Data Collection

To understand instructional quality, we collected video observations; to understand working conditions, we collected interviews with SETs, field observations, and a curriculum and personnel survey. The institutional review board at [Boston University] approved all research activities.

Video Observations. Based on prior research indicating the reliability of estimates of instructional quality increases with more observations (Kane & Staiger, 2012), we conducted three video observations of reading instruction ($M = 25$ min), scheduling them at SETs' convenience.

Interviews. SETs participated in three interviews (about 45 min each; >2 hours per teacher total). The first included questions about their job (e.g., "Can you describe for me what your job is?") and working conditions (e.g., "How would you describe the school

culture at [school]?"). Later interviews included questions about how the year was going and issues that arose in prior data collection. We asked probing questions (e.g., "Can you tell me more?") to prompt deep discussion.

Field Observations. We conducted two full-day field observations of each SET. The third author arrived at school at the same time as SETs and stayed until they left (observing each SET for a total of 13–16 hr), following them as a detached observer and taking detailed field notes. The field notes form included three columns: (a) time, (b) open notes for records of SETs' activities, and (c) reflections. Field notes helped us build rapport, make sense of interview data that would otherwise have been hard to interpret, and ask contextualized questions in subsequent interviews.

Curriculum and Personnel Survey. SETs' descriptions of curricular resources were often vague, and SETs often gained new materials midyear. It was also unclear exactly how many paraprofessionals served in their classes due to midyear changes. Thus, at the end of the year, SETs completed a survey listing all reading curricula and precisely reporting numbers and qualifications of paraprofessionals.

Data Analysis

To form trustworthy hypotheses, we constructed analyses so findings about working conditions would not influence findings about instruction, or vice versa. Two distinct teams led the two data analysis streams, one developing analytic case summaries of working conditions and one developing analytic case summaries of instruction (Appendix B in the online supplement). Teams had access to data only for their analysis; they did not discuss or have access to one another's data or findings until both analyses were complete. The third author (the principle investigator [PI]) collected most data and thus had assumptions about both working conditions and instruction. So these assumptions would not bias analyses, she was not part of either analytic

team; instead, she structured overall processes, keeping each team apprised of the other's progress and planning for data integration. Once separate analyses were complete, we held a 3-day retreat with both teams to integrate findings as well as one half-day retreat to revise findings (described in more detail later).

Positionality. All team members are special education scholars who concur that both individual and contextual factors can shape instruction, but we vary in the extent to which we gravitate toward individual versus contextual explanations for differences in instructional quality. Some of us tend to focus on how SETs' characteristics explain differences in instruction, whereas others tend to focus on how working conditions shape instruction. This study focused on contextual explanations, but diverse perspectives helped us critically examine conclusions. We discussed our perspectives often, considering how they might shape findings, to ensure data fully substantiated conclusions.

Instructional Quality Data Analysis. We analyzed video data using the Preservice Observation Instrument in Special Education protocol (POISE; Appendix C in the online supplement) because its domains are aligned with research on effective instruction for students with EBD (Campbell et al., 2018) and validation work indicates its promise in capturing SETs' instructional quality (Pua et al., 2021). POISE includes three domains: (a) classroom management (CM), (b) explicit and systematic instruction (ESI), and (c) responsiveness to individual student learning (RISL). CM addresses organizational skills and behavior techniques to engage students in a structured, respectful learning environment free of distractions; maintain momentum; manage time efficiently; and promote positive behavior. ESI is a highly structured, systematic method for teaching academic skills. RISL assesses the extent to which a SET adjusts instruction in relation to individual student needs. POISE scoring includes two steps. First, the rater uses 2-min partial-interval recording and momentary time sampling to

assess instructional behaviors and student off-task behavior, both scored dichotomously. The rater then assesses instructional quality on 12 items in the three domains on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *very low quality*; 5 = *very high quality*) with reference to rubrics for each domain. Scores are averaged to produce overall and domain scores.

Pua et al. (2021) conducted validation studies with pre- and in-service SETs. Raters were trained to double-score lessons of pre-service SETs providing intensive reading instruction. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC; .60) indicated good interrater reliability; weighted kappa for overall scores ranged from 0.28 to 0.53, suggesting fair to moderate agreement consistent with similarly designed instruments (e.g., Doabler et al., 2015). When used to observe early career SETs, agreement was also high, with kappa for items ranging from 0.63 to 1.00. Alpha values for subscales were high (CM, $\alpha = .93$; ESI, $\alpha = .89$; and RISL, $\alpha = .87$; Brownell et al., 2017).

Two researchers double-scored all lessons. Domain scores ranged from 1.10 to 3.75, with a mean of 2.44 ($SD = 0.70$), and overall scores ranged from 1.60 to 3.75, with a mean of 2.66 ($SD = 0.74$). Average ICC on interval items was .90, with a range of .86 to .96 across items. Average exact agreement was 70%, and adjacent agreement was 90% across each domain, with an average ICC of .87, a range of .77 to .92 across domains, and an ICC of .91 for the overall rating. Raters constructed case summaries of SETs' instruction (see Appendix D in the online supplement for an example). Using quantitative data, contemporaneous scoring notes, and verbatim excerpts, narratives described SETs' strengths and difficulties along POISE domains that were consistent across lessons. Case summaries elucidated POISE ratings for the qualitative team during the analytic retreat.

Working Conditions Data Analysis. First, we deductively applied Bettini et al.'s (2016) conceptual framework to interview data, using a priori deductive codes representing working conditions. For each interview, we created an analytic memo describing the SET's

experience of that condition and potential inductive codes to capture salient dimensions of that condition for these SETs. For example, in the deductive code “materials and resources,” we inductively identified dimensions (e.g., academic curriculum and materials). We added “paraprofessional support” to the framework, as it was distinct in the data from collegial and administrative support but could not be considered materials and resources (see Appendix E in the online supplement for a sample of the codebook).

After developing the codebook, we coded interviews in an iterative process, aiming to remain close to initial definitions of the codes and ensure our individual coding was closely calibrated. The first author trained two team members to unitize and code interview data. For each round of interviews, we first met to collaboratively unitize and code an interview. Two team members then double-coded 25% of remaining interviews in that round. Kappa ranged from 0.427 to 0.853; in cases of disagreement or with codes for which kappa was low, coders compared work and discussed until reaching consensus before coding further. This helped fine-tune coders’ work. Two team members separately coded remaining interviews in that round using NVivo.

Finally, two team members compiled case reports describing each SET’s experience of each condition (see Appendix F in the online supplement for an example). One team member reviewed all coded data to describe how each condition manifested for each SET. A second team member provided critical feedback. The PI reviewed case summaries, searching for disconfirming evidence. For example, the PI noted three statements in one case summary that diverged slightly from her interpretation. The team reviewed and discussed relevant segments of transcripts, responding to one another in a memo. For two of these, we confirmed the summary accurately represented the data and used more quotes to support interpretations; in one instance, we revised our interpretation.

Data Integration. We integrated working conditions and instructional quality data in two analytic retreats. We began the first (a 3-day retreat) by discussing our preconceptions about

factors shaping instruction. We bracketed these and focused analytic conversations by establishing three guiding norms aligned with our purpose and epistemological orientation. First, we concur that many factors can drive instruction, but we focused on working conditions. Second, we privileged SETs as knowers; their perspectives primarily drove how we understood working conditions, whereas etic data sources (e.g., field observations) were secondary. Finally, consistent with research (Campbell et al., 2018), we defined quality instruction using principles of explicit instruction.

We then rank ordered SETs by POISE scores and reviewed qualitative and quantitative analytic summaries, developing data displays to consider how working conditions might explain instructional quality. Each data display focused on one working condition and had three columns: (a) instructional quality, where we listed SETs in order from weakest to strongest; (b) SETs’ experiences of that working condition, where we used analytic summaries to record SETs’ experiences of that condition, and (c) how that condition interacted with other conditions, where we recorded how that condition related to other working conditions. We used field notes and the curriculum and personnel survey to elaborate understandings and clarify confusion. Looking across the data displays, we collaboratively developed assertions about which working conditions differentiated among SETs along the continuum of instructional quality. This helped us to determine how working conditions differed for SETs who provided stronger versus weaker instruction and to develop the final three categories around which results are organized.

We then engaged in analytic writing, using this process to ensure data supported each assertion. We systematically reviewed all data sources to ascertain credibility of assertions, examining case summaries and coded data for confirming and disconfirming evidence. We used field notes and the curriculum and personnel survey to complement interview data, using them to ensure accurate nuance and substantiate assertions. At a second half-day retreat, we reviewed all analytic writing noted previously and collaboratively revised the assertions developed in the

first retreat, refining them to ensure accurate representations of the data.

Enhancing Trustworthiness and Credibility. Efforts to enhance trustworthiness and credibility (described earlier) include (a) extensive field engagement, (b) separating qualitative and quantitative analyses before data integration, (c) rigorous procedures to ensure reliable quantitative ratings and consistent qualitative coding, (d) triangulation among data sources, (e) careful consideration and use of varied positionalities, and (f) repeated systematic searches for disconfirming evidence (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Results

SETs who provided stronger instruction experienced working conditions that differed in key ways from those who provided weaker instruction. Specifically, they had (a) partners coleading their programs; (b) an adequate number of reliable paraprofessionals, with support and time for training; and (c) protected instructional time. Figure 1 displays how SETs are positioned relative to one another regarding instructional quality and each condition. Importantly, these conditions were related to one another: Partners played a crucial role in training and supporting paraprofessionals, and paraprofessionals and partners together protected time for instruction. For all conditions, Fiona and Eve (whose instruction was strongest) experienced the strongest conditions, whereas Amelia (whose instruction was weakest) experienced the weakest conditions. We first describe each SET's reading instructional quality (Subquestion 1) and then explore how these working conditions manifested for each SET (overall research question; Subquestion 2).

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SETs' Instructional Quality

We rank ordered SETs based on scores across domains of POISE (Table 1). Fiona (first) scored approximately 1 full scale point above the next closest participant overall and across all domains. Amelia (sixth) consistently scored below all other SETs, with a range of 1.3 to 2.0 across all domains. Remaining SETs were clustered more closely together. For CM, Eve (second) and Betty (fifth) were separated by only 0.3 scale points, and they were separated by 0.7 and 0.6 scale points on ESI and RISL, respectively. Betty scored higher than Iris in the CM domain despite being lower overall. Results indicated a stark quantitative distinction between the top and bottom SETs, with more subtle distinctions among those in the middle.

SETs' Working Conditions

*Partners.*¹ SETs who provided stronger instruction had at least one colleague coleading their program. Their partnership was characterized by a consistent, proactive role with a clear division of labor and shared understandings of the program's purpose, such that they trusted partners' decisions. Partners provided student services and took on leadership, including communicating with others, fulfilling other responsibilities, and planning. Partners thereby decreased demands on SETs, sharing the responsibility and stress of consequential decisions.

Trusting, consistent partners with clear divisions of responsibility. Fiona and Eve had consistent partners who they trusted and with whom they clearly divided responsibilities. Fiona and Greta (her partner) had defined, differentiated roles. Greta took primary responsibility for behavior management, whereas Fiona had primary responsibility for academics. Greta said, "[I] help manage student behaviors" and "oversee the program. I help train staff, consult with the [general education] teachers. If the kid needs a discrete trial teaching, I'll oversee that. . . . I create behavior plans." In contrast, Fiona described her role as "working on the instruction to meet [students'] . . . need in . . . academics."

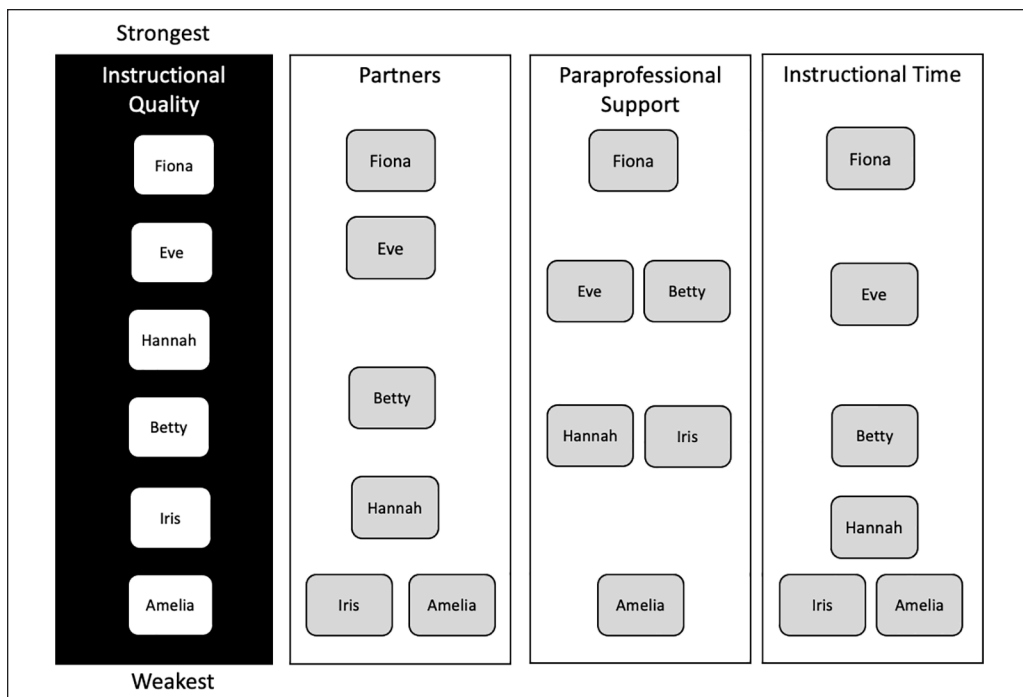


Figure 1. Special education teachers’ instructional quality and working conditions, relative to each other. Instructional quality rank is based on Preservice Observation Instrument in Special Education scores. Our assessment of working conditions is drawn from interview data; field notes and the curriculum and personnel survey were used to understand nuanced differences between cases and contributed to the rank ordering.

Table 1. Rank Order of Teaching Quality Across POISE Domains.

Participant	Rank	CM		ESI		RISL		Overall	
		M	Range	M	Range	M	Range	M	Range
Fiona	1	3.8	3.5–4.2	3.4	3.5–3.8	3.6	3.5–3.8	3.6	3.3–3.8
Eve	2	2.8	2.2–3.2	2.5	2.0–3.0	2.6	2.0–3.2	2.6	2.0–3.1
Hannah	3	2.7	2.3–3.5	2.3	2.0–2.8	2.5	2.2–2.8	2.5	2.2–2.8
Iris	4	2.3	2.0–2.8	1.8	2.2–1.3	2.2	2.8–1.5	2.1	1.8–2.4
Betty	5	2.5	2.2–2.8	1.8	1.5–2.0	1.7	1.5–1.8	2.0	1.9–2.0
Amelia	6	2.0	1.5–2.3	1.3	1.0–1.5	1.5	1.3–1.8	1.6	1.3–1.8

Note. Scores are on a 4-point scale. POISE = Preservice Observation Instrument in Special Education; CM = classroom management; ESI = explicit and systematic instruction; RISL = responsiveness to individual student learning.

Although they had well-differentiated roles, Fiona and Greta emphasized they were a “team,” and we observed them collaborating closely. For example, at 10:24 to 10:37 on a field observation, they planned for an individualized education program meeting, discussing patterns in a student’s behavior and

strategies that worked for the student previously. We also observed Fiona planning or providing instruction while Greta took on other tasks, such as when Fiona organized math materials while Greta trained a paraprofessional on behavior data collection. Further, Fiona and Greta’s school had recently added a

full-time school counselor, Gabby, who was in their program half-time. Fiona and Greta emphasized that Gabby was an important part of their team, referring to her as “amazing” and “fully available to us.” Her responsibilities included counseling, holding social skills groups, and processing with students after significant behaviors. In field observations, we observed them proactively collaborating with Gabby, and she supported them in responding to significant behavior. For example, in a field observation, when a student was engaging in unsafe behavior, Gabby, Greta, and a paraprofessional monitored him (e.g., prompting him to use strategies) while Fiona provided instruction to another student in a separate area.

Eve’s partner, Emmalyn, played a full-time leadership role in their program. She completed paperwork, ran paraprofessional trainings twice a week, communicated with general educators, hired paraprofessionals, developed a program manual, and managed behavioral routines. We also observed Emmalyn providing preventive and reactive behavior support. For example, on one field observation, Eve prepared for instruction while Emmalyn provided a social skills lesson. Importantly, Eve trusted Emmalyn. For example, when discussing paraprofessional hiring, Eve said,

I’m not [involved]. . . . Emmalyn is. . . . I 100% trust her. . . . [If] she thinks somebody’s good, I would [put] money down that they’re good . . . and if she thinks someone’s not good, then I trust her . . . so that makes it easy. If it was someone . . . who was. . . making the decisions and I didn’t have that trust . . . then that would be really difficult for me.

Eve and Emmalyn divided responsibilities differently than Fiona and Greta, but both partnerships were characterized by trust, clear division of responsibilities, and shared leadership.

Partnership without shared understandings. Betty’s full-time partner, Brook, was a school counselor with responsibility for counseling students. Betty alluded to Brook supporting paraprofessionals, but she did not state how, nor was this evident in observations. Unlike Emmalyn and Greta, Brook did not proactively colead the program; rather, Betty

directed Brook to engage in routine tasks, such as deescalating behavior. Further, Brook and Betty disagreed about the purpose and structure of the program and their roles in it. Betty said,

Academics are super important to me as a special ed teacher because it’s my role. I need to make sure that all my students are . . . accessing the curriculum. . . . She comes from more of a counseling perspective. . . . That’s not my forte or . . . how I was trained. So, it’s also about figuring out what my role is versus her role. And then how . . . a counseling perspective can work within a public school setting. Because you can’t . . . do the outside counseling things necessarily that you might in a different setting. And a lot of it is geared towards . . . making the students successful here at school.

We noted this in observations. For example, in one observation, they discussed a student’s needs; Brook felt the student needed at least an hour a day to process emotions, whereas Betty felt they should redirect him quickly, so he could access curriculum. When students were present, we saw Betty and Brook negotiating decisions in the moment, such as when Brook told a student to use the cool-down space, offering him a bean bag, and Betty said the bean bag was a reinforcer for him and so he should not get it if he had been aggressive. Brook deferred to Betty but without shared understandings, they had to negotiate decisions rather than rely on each other. Betty contrasted Brook with a prior partner, who had “much more similar views” to her own.

In her third interview, Betty reflected on how she would value having a partner. Whereas Fiona and Eve reported feeling like they were a part of a team, she described feeling isolated:

It’s hard when you’re an island . . . because you just don’t have those people to talk to. . . . That’s . . . the trickiest part about this particular program. You just don’t have . . . the collaborative support. . . . That’s the hardest part about running a [self-contained] program. It’s just you.

Leading alone. Amelia, Hannah, and Iris had no partners. Amelia collaborated with a school counselor, Anna, who supported her

program but was not consistently present due to other responsibilities. Amelia said Anna

has the whole school. . . . She's been good . . . when she's had to cancel groups . . . because our kids have been in crisis . . . we need someone . . . specialized to make [the program] successful . . . not even just for crisis situations but to be proactive.

In field observations, we saw Anna supporting students during significant behaviors, and we saw her taking a student for counseling. However, she was present only during significant behaviors. Amelia said, "I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders for some of these kids."

Hannah and Iris both had a colleague who taught a separate class of students with EBD in other grades. They coordinated some activities with these colleagues, but they taught other students and did not take responsibilities off Hannah's and Iris's shoulders. In field observations, we saw Iris greeting Ivan (her colleague) before and after school and helping him with behavior. We did not see Hannah interacting with the other SET in her school.

Iris and Hannah also had specialized personnel who consulted with them, including a district board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA) and a social worker who provided services one period a week. They valued this support. For example, Hannah shared how these personnel had, in prior years, helped her advocate for support. Iris described the BCBA as "great," but she said their weekly meetings were often canceled because the BCBA supported many other schools. Hannah and Iris valued these individuals, but their role was limited. They were not present in any observations, and when a social worker went on maternity leave, there was no substitute.

Conclusions about partners. Partners took on key roles in Fiona's and Eve's programs, coleading programs by fulfilling essential responsibilities and proactively planning for the program. During instruction, they took on urgent responsibilities, such as supporting paraprofessionals and managing challenging behavior, allowing SETs to focus on instruction; Eve and Fiona trusted their partner to

make key decisions, such that they could share decision-making responsibilities. In contrast, other SETs led their programs alone. Betty and her partner did not have shared understandings, and her partner did not take a proactive role in leading her program. For Hannah, Iris, and Amelia, no qualified personnel were dedicated to the program.

Partners took on key roles in Fiona's and Eve's programs, coleading programs by fulfilling essential responsibilities and proactively planning for the program.

Paraprofessionals. SETs who provided stronger instruction had reliable paraprofessionals, colleagues who helped support paraprofessionals, and time to train paraprofessionals. SETs whose instruction was of lower quality had experiences lacking at least one of these characteristics.

Reliable paraprofessionals, with time and support for training and management. Fiona and Greta described paraprofessionals as reliable, caring, flexible, and hard-working. Fiona said, "This is now all our second year as a group. . . . We're able to facilitate better as a team because we know each other." She emphasized the importance of consistency, noting that when they were short-staffed, it caused a "big disruption." She gave an example of a student who could manipulate unfamiliar staff by saying, "I don't know how to do this, but I really do! . . . That's unfair to him because now he just missed 2 hours of academics." Consistency was evident in observations, as paraprofessionals fulfilled responsibilities independently. For example, on the morning of each observation, they immediately independently prepared data sheets for the day.

Greta led weekly training and collaborated with a district BCBA to train staff on "managing behaviors, deescalations." Fiona and Greta had extended time for informal training. For example, on Fiona's first field observation, from 8:03 to 8:43, they were in the room with paraprofessionals, without

students, talking while working on various tasks. Topics addressed included reasons a student began cursing more, how to record data, content a student had not yet mastered, and how Fiona addressed a behavior the prior day. We observed similar discussions for about 40 min in the morning of all field observations. During the school day, we often observed incidental training with Greta, as in the following exchange between Greta and Grace:

-
- 12:32 Greta tells Grace how to distinguish between compliance and noncompliance. Grace tells more about what student did. Greta talks about how they can describe the antecedent. Greta writes down some of the data Grace had described. "Still document there was a slammed finger because they might have been what triggered it." Grace shared it was hard to fill out.
- 12:33 Greta says she did a good job, explains why, points to something specific that she did right. Grace asks question. Greta says, "See, you always do it right!"
- 12:34 Greta tells Grace she did an awesome job with the time-out procedure. Grace comments that it is hard when she hasn't done it in a while. Greta praises her more: "You followed the protocol, exactly the way it is supposed to be done."
-

We observed this kind of interaction regularly, in all field observations of both Fiona and Greta.

Reliable paraprofessionals, with support but limited time for training. Eve and Betty described having reliable paraprofessionals, with support but insufficient time for training.

Eve spoke highly of paraprofessionals, and consistency was evident in field observations, as paraprofessionals gathered materials, led activities, and followed routines, conferring with Eve only for changes in routine. Eve valued consistency, contrasting when "we're completely staffed and . . . everything's running like a semi-well-oiled machine" to when someone left and they had to rely on "staff who doesn't know what they're doing. And it

just like feels like stuff falls apart." However, Eve felt some paraprofessionals lacked key knowledge: "A lot of the aides don't have any experience teaching. . . . I have . . . an aide who didn't know what vowels were."

Eve described teaching paraprofessionals instructional skills while Emmalyn provided training for 10 min twice a week on behavioral skills. Eve felt this was inadequate but said there was no other time because students needed supervision during paraprofessionals' workday. She thus relied on incidental training; Eve said she would "pull someone aside or . . . model." For example, on one observation, a paraprofessional sat with Eve while she taught a phonics lesson. Eve paused often to explain content and pedagogical choices. However, these interactions were brief, with students present. Eve said, "With more training we could really be in a better place."

Betty also spoke highly of paraprofessionals, and they were consistently present, but like Eve, she described relying on "incidental" training, as only 1 hr a month was scheduled for training. We observed this in a field observation, when she took advantage of a schedule change to train them on deescalation strategies. Like Eve, Betty felt incidental training was insufficient, resulting in only "half a conversation," in which key content was not adequately addressed.

Consistent but insufficient numbers of paraprofessionals, without time or support for training. Iris and Hannah both had larger classes than other SETs (nine or 10 students vs. three to seven) yet had only one paraprofessional for most of the year (a second joined Iris's school midyear, splitting time between Iris's and another SET's classes). Their paraprofessionals were reliably present, but Hannah and Iris expressed concern that they were inadequately trained and there was not time for training. Further, our observations indicated they may not have had enough staff.

Iris's full-time paraprofessional, Ian, was new, but his consistency was evident, as he independently prompted students to follow routines, led academic activities, and reinforced behavior. Iris said Ian had "stepped it up and . . . shown a lot of . . . enthusiasm." However,

she wished for more training time: “I can’t expect to give him a lesson and say, ‘Here you go. You’re going to teach this right now.’ That’s a lot to ask. I maybe wish that there was more time.” Iris described providing incidental training: “I’ll pull him aside and be like . . . ‘Can you tell me more about . . . why you did this this way?’” Her concerns were consistent with observations; Ian arrived <10 min before students and left after them. We observed no formal or informal training.

Iris also expressed concern that one paraprofessional was insufficient. When describing challenges to strong reading instruction, she said they did not “have enough eyes . . . to keep an eye on all of the groups.” Indeed, in field observations, we observed Iris and Ian being pulled away from students with whom they were working, to address behavior among students working independently. Further, there were multiple times when only one adult was present with many students; when Ian walked a student to another class or when one of them left the room to address student behavior, the other was alone with a full class, preventing them from focusing on their group. Further, this would have been unsafe had a student engaged in a significant behavior.

Hannah’s experience was similar to Iris’s. Her paraprofessional, Harold, was consistently present, but she relied on incidental training. She did not want more paraprofessionals, due to prior negative experiences. However, as with Iris, field observations indicated a need for more paraprofessionals; they could not respond to all student needs at the same time, and Hannah was left alone with most students when Harold supported students elsewhere. The observer reflected, “She needs more paras—Mr. H can’t keep up with everything she needs him to do.”

Insufficient, inconsistent paraprofessionals, without training support. Amelia described paraprofessionals with general positive statements followed by caveats (e.g., “I’m not sure [paraprofessional] thinks it [EBD] is a disability”). Amelia had three paraprofessionals at a time, but only one, Amina, was there all year. In field observations, we observed Amina independently following routines, enforcing

expectations, and supporting students, like other programs’ consistent paraprofessionals. In the second field observation, Anais (whose first day was on the first field observation) was also doing this, indicating she had become consistent. However, this was not the case for other paraprofessionals or for Anais at first. Amelia said inconsistency often led to reliance on staff without training: “[Mr. Andrew is] filling in. . . . I tried to put him with some of the easier students . . . because he’s not CPI [Crisis Prevention Institute] trained.” Due to inconsistency, staff often came from other classes to provide coverage, which Amelia called “staff filler.” We observed this in the first field observation, when Anais began her first day and another paraprofessional was absent. The principal sent four different staff to fill in for 1 to 2 hr each. These staff did not know students, limiting their ability to follow routines, so they regularly asked Amelia and Amina what to do, diverting attention from students. Amelia said she sometimes turned down staff support because she “didn’t want to have just random people.” Amelia did not discuss training, perhaps because investments in training would yield little benefit with temporary staff; she said, “I don’t want to teach someone new every day.” In the first field observation, she often provided incidental training for new or substitute paraprofessionals (e.g., telling Anais a student’s lunchtime goal), and she talked with staff about 10 min before school.

Amelia also expressed concern that because paraprofessionals accompanied students to general education (as in Betty’s, Eve’s, and Fiona’s programs), there was an inadequate number. For example, she said staffing limited incentive systems: “I didn’t want to say ‘OK, here are all the things you guys can earn,’ but then . . . we didn’t have any staff [to fulfill those promises].” Field observations aligned with her concerns. For example, in one field observation, a student spent about 110 min engaged in significant behavior, requiring three staff for safety. Anna (school counselor) skipped her lunch to help Amelia while Anais (on her first day) adjusted her own and students’ schedules to ensure student supervision. Amelia said, “When Agnes [a student] needs so much, other students

can't get what they need, and that is [why another student is struggling]."

Conclusions about paraprofessionals. Fiona, Eve, and Betty had an adequate number of consistent paraprofessionals, such that they could rely on paraprofessionals to supervise, manage routines, and address behavior. Further, Fiona had time and support for training, allowing her to depend on paraprofessionals for complex, technical tasks. In contrast, Iris and Hannah had a consistent paraprofessional but no time or support for training; further, one paraprofessional was insufficient to effectively serve their students. Finally, Amelia had an insufficient number of paraprofessionals, who were inconsistent and whom she had limited time and support to train.

Instructional Time. SETs who provided stronger instruction tended to have scheduled, protected, and uninterrupted instructional time.

Protected instructional time. Fiona's instruction was almost never interrupted. For example, in one observation, Fiona taught one-on-one for 39 min. The only interruption was when Fiona asked Greta and a paraprofessional for advice. Several factors supported uninterrupted instruction. First, a solid wall divided the safe space from instructional space. Fiona said, "If behaviors are happening, [other students are] really unaware of it . . . so [it has] really improved the education." She compared this with the prior year, when the safe space had been in the room and behavior interrupted instruction. Second, Greta managed behavior and supervised paraprofessionals during instruction, and paraprofessionals followed routines independently. For example, in the observation just described, others entered and exited the room seven times, but they completed tasks without Fiona's support, addressing questions to Greta, who said this "has been working successfully because . . . when I'm [with a student who is struggling] . . . Fiona can still instruct." In contrast, when Greta had been the only SET, "I'd be going to help with behaviors, and sometimes it takes two, three people, and then little Johnny over

here is supposed to be getting instruction, and he didn't." Their division of responsibilities prioritized instruction.

Partially protected instructional time. Eve had scheduled instructional time, and in field observations, we observed Emmalyn often taking responsibility for student behavior and supervising paraprofessionals when Eve was teaching, preventing interruptions. For example, in a field observation, Eve taught reading for 26 uninterrupted minutes while a paraprofessional supervised a student using calm-down strategies and Emmalyn ate lunch with another student. Once Eve began instruction, she was not interrupted, but unlike Fiona, behaviors sometimes prevented her from beginning instruction. Eve said, "The academic instruction definitely gets brushed aside. . . . I have to give my attention to the unsafe behavior."

Unprotected, inconsistent instructional time. For Amelia, Iris, Hannah, and Betty, instructional time was either inconsistent or unprotected, although the reasons for this varied.

Amelia experienced very frequent interruptions, to direct paraprofessionals and address behavior. For example, in a field observation, a lesson was interrupted eight times in 12 min: six times to direct paraprofessionals and twice to redirect off-task students working on their own. Amelia described needing "to attend to the biggest crisis." Consistent with this, when a student engaged in significant behaviors for about 110 min, a school counselor and district BCBA supported, but Amelia directed their response. Paraprofessionals moved other students to another space, repeatedly coming back to ask her what to do. Consequently, she did not have consistent instructional time; she changed the schedule on the board often, depending on behavior.

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Iris's and Hannah's instruction was often interrupted by behavior and noninstructional responsibilities. Iris described how she had insufficient personnel to manage students in reading:

Say, for example . . . reading is going great, and I need to leave or my para needs to leave because a kid is struggling. . . . Then, you have one reading group down, and then I'm trying to talk to the other reading group, and then my reading group is struggling. What ends up happening is reading doesn't really get completed.

Interruptions were evident in observations. Like Amelia, Iris and Hannah often stopped mid-lesson to redirect students who were supposed to work independently but were off task. Iris reported further interruptions from other responsibilities: "I'm . . . tied up testing a kid while I'm trying to get these guys to do something else, and then I'm leaving the classroom."

Betty did not have scheduled instructional time. She described her role as "[supporting] our students in accessing the general education curriculum," explaining, "If a student is ever not able to be in the classroom . . . we just . . . flip a switch and all the work comes down here." We observed her supervising students completing work, not providing instruction. This was exemplified in a field observation, when three students were working on different tasks. Betty praised, reinforced, and redirected but did not instruct them. At one point, she asked a paraprofessional (who attended general education with a student) what a student was supposed to do. Observations reflected this role, as her actions were not oriented to an objective.

Conclusions about instructional time. Whereas Fiona's instructional time was never interrupted, other teachers experienced either inconsistency in when they could teach (Betty, Eve) or constant interruptions due to other responsibilities during instruction (Amelia, Hannah, Iris). Importantly, interruptions to instruction were tightly tied to the other working conditions, as trusted partners and consistent, well-trained paraprofessionals played crucial roles in protecting teachers'

instructional time by managing other responsibilities during instruction.

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Tentative Assertions

Other conditions also emerged as potentially important, but the evidence for these was less robust, as they relied on a comparison with one SET.

Materials. Betty, Eve, Hannah, and Iris described having varied materials for teaching reading, including teacher guides, online resources, and supplemental materials. Fiona reported struggling to access the "right" curricula but said varied personnel (e.g., administrators) helped her get materials; we observed her using several curricula (e.g., Foundations). In contrast, Amelia reported almost totally lacking reading curricula. We observed no materials on her shelves; she said, "My classroom doesn't have much in it right now." She thus constructed curriculum ad hoc. She found a first-grade Houghton Mifflin text in the copy room and decided "to start that with my first grader." She said, "I do create a lot of my own . . . [and use a lot of] Teachers Pay Teachers . . . Pinterest." She described piecing together instructional goals and resources, "going more on [student] interest." She worried that without "specialized" materials, student needs were unmet. She described her reading instruction as a "shizzle show," whereas she said her math instruction was "pretty good" because "I have more resources."

Role Differentiation. Fiona and Eve both had full-time partners, with whom they had

trusting relationships, yet Fiona's instructional time was more rigorously protected than Eve's. One explanation might be the specific division of responsibilities with partners. Eve and Emmalyn shared responsibility for behavior, whereas Greta took full responsibility for behavior, fully protecting Fiona's academic responsibilities. Conclusions about the extent to which this may explain differences in their instruction are tentative, but it suggests that the role partners play may contribute to the extent to which a partnership facilitates stronger instruction.

Role Conceptualization. Betty's case suggests that how one's instructional role is conceptualized may shape how SETs use their working conditions. Betty had plenty of time with students but conceptualized the purpose of this time as supporting general education work, and this time was unscheduled. This left her with limited time to actually teach. However, because role conceptions emerged as relevant only in one case, we cannot draw firm conclusions about it.

Planning Time. Iris had consistent planning time but described a wide range of tasks that she needed to complete (e.g., paperwork, testing) during planning, whereas Amelia, Betty, and Eve all reported their planning time was inconsistent and unpredictable. Fiona expressed similar concerns but noted that due to adequate staffing, she was able to take planning time consistently that year. Field observations confirmed Amelia experienced almost no planning time except in unpredictable, short pockets, whereas Fiona used protected planning periods in all field observations. This is noteworthy, as Fiona and Amelia represent the strongest and weakest instruction, but we were unable to differentiate among other SETs because inconsistent, inadequate planning time was so common. (Note that Hannah did not discuss planning time even when prompted; we observed her planning before school but not during the day).

Discussion

We found three working conditions interacted to shape reading instruction among SETs

teaching students with EBD in elementary self-contained settings. First, SETs who provided stronger instruction had a trusted partner coleading the program who shared their understanding of the program's purpose, whereas those who provided weaker instruction led programs alone. SETs who provided stronger instruction also had consistent paraprofessionals, with time and support for training; those who provided weaker instruction had too few paraprofessionals, inconsistent paraprofessionals, or inadequate time and support for training. Together, partners and paraprofessionals protected instruction. Patterns in these conditions clearly differentiated among SETs, accounting for variation along the full continuum of instructional quality. Other conditions also emerged as potentially important, but evidence was less robust. Results align with Bettini et al.'s (2016) framework, providing preliminary evidence that social resources and instructional time may relate to SETs' instruction; results further indicate a partner and paraprofessionals may be especially important forms of collegial support for these SETs.

First, SETs who provided stronger instruction had a trusted partner coleading the program who shared their understanding of the program's purpose, whereas those who provided weaker instruction led programs alone.

Together, partners and paraprofessionals protected instruction.

Partners seemed to underlie other conditions by supporting paraprofessional training and protecting time to plan and provide instruction. Because students with EBD have such complex needs, leading a program for them may require dedicated time and expertise of more than one person. Collaborative partners decreased SETs' responsibilities and took responsibility for addressing student behavior and training paraprofessionals; as such, partners likely decreased instructional

interruptions, thus improving SETs' ability to use instructional time productively. SETs' scores on POISE domains likely varied not merely because of SETs' actions in the lesson but also because partners' activities allowed SETs to remain in the moment, focused on and responding to student needs. Partners' work may specifically have influenced SETs' POISE scores by shaping the extent to which they were able to use time productively (CM), present clear and coherent instruction (ESI), and attend to monitoring, providing feedback, and then adjusting to facilitate student learning (RISL). For example, Iris led small-group reading instruction while also managing other students and supervising a paraprofessional. These responsibilities often forced her to disengage from instruction. In these moments, her momentum dropped; students waited for directions or engaged in problem behaviors, further disrupting the lesson's flow. SETs with partners did not experience these interruptions, potentially improving their capacity to focus on instruction. These findings suggest leaders should consider investing in personnel to colead self-contained programs with SETs.

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Our results differ from Cumming et al.'s (2020). They found that SETs who reported stronger curricular resources and more planning time were more likely to report using effective practices; they did not evaluate if SETs had partners or whether instructional time was protected. Of note, workload manageability mediated relationships between working conditions and use of effective practices. Our findings suggest partners may play a key role in increasing workload manageability, by taking on other responsibilities so SETs can focus on instruction. Further, Cumming et al. (2020) found no results for paraprofessional training, whereas our findings suggest potential complexities in relationships between paraprofessionals and instruction; consistency, number of paraprofessionals,

and time and support for training may all play a role. Consistent with their results, our findings tentatively support the importance of curricular resources, as Amelia's "hodgepodge" curricula may have contributed to disengaged and unfocused instruction. Other research (e.g., Siuty et al., 2018) substantiates that providing Amelia with structured curriculum may have supported her to engage students more productively.

Partners may play a key role in increasing workload manageability, by taking on other responsibilities so SETs can focus on instruction.

Some conditions from the conceptual framework did not emerge in our analysis. For example, ample research indicates administrative support is important for SETs' experiences (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019) and teachers' effectiveness (S. Johnson et al., 2012). The conditions we identified likely result from administrators' staffing decisions; yet, SETs' perceptions of administrative support did not differentiate among those who provided stronger versus weaker instruction. For example, Iris and Betty described administrators positively, whereas Fiona and Eve described strengths and weaknesses. Possibly, SETs who expect less may be satisfied with little support, whereas those who expect more may express concern even with more support. SETs' perceptions of administrators may also depend on factors (e.g., personal connections) unrelated to personnel decisions. Other ways of evaluating administrative support may be needed.

Limitations

First, results are not intended to generalize; purposive sampling precludes generalization, and findings would likely differ for SETs in other service delivery models or locations. Second, our methods allowed us to differentiate between SETs who did and did not have curricular materials but did not allow us to evaluate whether those materials supported

explicit instruction; we suspect the curricula Fiona (Foundations) and Eve (Wilson) used may better support explicit instruction than those Betty (Words Their Way) and Iris (Leveled Literacy Intervention) used, but substantiating that suspicion would require deep content analysis of the materials, which was outside the scope of this study. Third, to evaluate instruction, we used POISE, a content generic measure that does not capture reading-specific practices. POISE is based on key instructional principles and practices for both reading instruction and students with EBD (Campbell et al., 2018), yet a reading-specific instrument might have produced different results. Finally, differences in knowledge and skill, which we did not evaluate, likely explain some differences in instruction; for example, Hannah had unsupportive conditions yet provided stronger instruction than Amelia, Betty, and Iris, perhaps reflecting stronger knowledge and skill.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should examine if results generalize, testing how these conditions relate to instructional quality or effectiveness in a large sample. State administrative data sets could be leveraged to test if SETs promote stronger outcomes when they work with a partner and when paraprofessionals are more experienced, especially if these data were paired with surveys about relationships with partners and paraprofessionals. We also recommend scholars replicate our study with SETs in other settings (e.g., co-taught classes); other SETs may not require the same supports our SETs did, but studies using methods like ours to examine how working conditions relate to instruction could identify ways to better support them. Future analyses are also needed to more deeply explore conditions that emerged as most important in our analysis. For example, studies could explore how partners work together in more and less effective programs.

Implications for Practice

School and district leaders should consider whether current staffing models for these

programs allow SETs to ensure student safety without interrupting instruction. Our results indicate two or more skilled program leaders may be needed so SETs do not simultaneously have to instruct and address significant behavior. Leaders should be aware that in programs created to support students with significant behavior challenges, significant behaviors should be expected (but decreasing over time), and they should staff programs accordingly. Our results indicate partners may be important to ensure SETs can focus on instruction when significant behavior occurs. SETs can advocate for support to provide strong instruction by communicating with leaders about barriers to instruction and by asking for support to remove barriers.

Leaders should be aware that in programs created to support students with significant behavior challenges, significant behaviors should be expected (but decreasing over time), and they should staff programs accordingly.

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Supplemental Materials

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. Configurations of personnel in programs were each unique. One special education teacher (SET) was concerned that if we referred to the social worker in her program as a social worker, she would be individually identifiable if her administrators read the study, because no other SETs had a social worker in their programs. We thus refer to

the social worker as a school counselor. We acknowledge that these are distinct qualifications, but the social worker in her school was filling the same role as school counselors in other programs, and this does not alter the substantive findings.

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