How Expert Special Educators Effectively Negotiate Their Job Demands

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored how three expert secondary special education teachers in Hawaii successfully negotiated their job demands. Purposeful sampling was used to select one secondary school on the Leeward coast of Oahu. We used reputational-case sampling to select participants that fit Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (1980) expert theoretical construct, and defined expert special education teachers as (a) licensed to teach special education in Hawaii, (b) taught special education in Hawaii for a minimum of 6 years, and (c) nominated by their principals and special education department chair as experts. Data were derived from semi-structured interviews, observations, and teacher-kept time journals and were analyzed through individual and cross-case analysis to uncover underlying themes. Findings from this qualitative study identified resources and supports, skills, behaviors, and dispositions that three expert special education co-teachers used to effectively manage their multiple job demands such that they averted burnout and remained in the field. Major themes regarding what helped the participants juggle their job demands included relying on others for help; working beyond required work hours; multi-tasking; and having good classroom management skills, a positive attitude, and empathy. These results have implications for teacher education programs, administrators, and practitioners regarding the qualities of expert special educators, how to move from a novice to expert teacher, and providing role clarification.

How Expert Special Educators Effectively Negotiate Their Job Demands

What is the one thing that government, research, and popular press reports in the United States all have in common with respect to special education? Answer: There is a severe shortage of special education teachers. Special education teacher positions are difficult to fill in all regions of the United States, with 98% of school districts nationwide and every state experiencing shortages of special educators (Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). These shortages likely will continue to get worse as qualified special education teachers exit the field, and the overall special education population increases (Data Accountability Center, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Smith, 2012; Smith, Montrosse, Robb, Tyler & Young, 2011). Unfortunately, the special education teacher shortage has a direct impact on the quality of education provided to students with disabilities. Several scholars have emphasized the positive impact that qualified special educators have on the academic and functional achievement of students with disabilities (Billingsley, 2004a; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002). And as the total number of special education teachers in the U.S. increased between 2008 and 2010, so did the number of

special educators who were not *highly-qualified* according to No Child Left Behind (Data Accountability Center, 2008a, 2008b, 2009b, 2009c, 2010). To fill vacant positions, unqualified teachers are often hired to provide services for students with disabilities. In these situations, students with disabilities often receive services from unlicensed and inexperienced special educators, which can result in inadequate educational experiences and reduced achievement levels (Billingsley, 2004a; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996).

To service the needs of students with disabilities and comply with the standards of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), educators and policymakers "must be aware of the special education teacher shortage, take steps to increase the supply of teachers, and lower rates of attrition" (Thornton et al., 2007, p. 233). It is imperative that steps are taken to retain quality special educators for the sake of providing students with disabilities appropriate educational opportunities (Billingsley, 1993, 2004a, 2004b; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996).

Job Demands of Special Educators

Lack of time, lack of resources, high caseloads, excessive paperwork, too many meetings, severed relationships with colleagues, lack of support, and excessive job stress are cited by special education teachers as reasons for leaving their jobs (Billingsley, Bodkins, & Hendricks, 1993; Plash & Piotrowski; 2006; Shimabukuro et al., 1999; Thornton et al., 2007; Tschantz & Markowitz, 2002). The job demands of special educators require that they juggle many tasks, which may include planning, coordinating, and attending many meetings; completing considerable amounts of paperwork; collaborating with parents and colleagues; supervising paraprofessionals; collecting data; planning and delivering instruction with general educators in co-taught classrooms; implementing behavior management plans; and delivering instruction to numerous students with varying disabilities under the pressures of federal mandates. Oftentimes, the stress that comes with these numerous and varied tasks leads special educators burnout, leave the field, or both (Billingsley, 2004a; Billingsley, Bodkins, & Hendricks, 1993; Kaff, 2004; Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2004; Shimabukuro et al., 1999; Thornton et al., 2007; Tschantz & Markowitz, 2002).

Studies focusing on reducing special education teacher burnout and attrition rates (e.g., Cecil & Forman, 1990; Cheek, Bradley, Parr, & Lan, 2003; Westling, Herzog, Cooper-Duffy, Prohn, & Ray, 2006; Whitaker, 2000) have primarily focused on identifying variables that contribute to burnout and attrition. However, little is known about how expert special education co-teachers effectively balance their job demands. Evaluating the job demands and effective time management strategies used by experienced, expert special education teachers may help yield information that can be used to design interventions and provide supports to improve special education teacher retention. As Otto and Arnold (2005) stated, "acquiring feedback from experienced educators can help identify the areas needing reform in order to retain special education teachers" (p. 253).

Purpose

The purpose of this case study was to identify and explore resources, supports, and skills used; and behaviors and dispositions exhibited by expert special education co-teachers to successfully negotiate their job demands.

Method

Participants and Setting

We used purposeful sampling to select one secondary school that employed several special educators who were eligible to participate in the study. Specifically, we employed reputational-case sampling, in which participants were recommended by knowledgeable individuals as the best examples for the phenomena under study (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). We defined expert special education teachers as: (a) having a license to teach special education in the state, (b) having taught special education for a minimum of six years, and (c) nominated by their principals and special education department chair as an expert special education teacher who effectively negotiates the demands of the job. We used the criteria of teaching for a minimum of six years because research has indicated that it takes three to five years of professional experience to demonstrate competence in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Eraut, 1994). The nomination form used by the principal and special education department chair to select expert special educators was derived from the expert category in Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (1980) Novice to Expert Theory, which posits five sequential phases of development: (a) novice, (b) advanced beginner, (c) competent, (d) proficient, and (e) expert. Experts exhibit deep, tacit understanding; ease with job performance; independence; holistic grasp; and vision of what is possible (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980; Lester, 2005). The theory was used as a framework to analyze how expert special education teachers manage their job demands. For example, an expert special educator's ability to adapt and make adjustments as necessary (Dreyfus, 1981; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980) may give them the flexibility and intuitive decision-making skills necessary to successfully execute their multiple job demands. We individualized the nomination form to fit the specific job demands of a special educator by taking Dreyfus' (1981) detailed characteristics of experts and categorizing them into the five general domains of expertise as defined by the Professional Standards for Conservation: knowledge, work standards, autonomy, coping with complexity, and perception of context (as cited in Lester, 2005). For example, the perception of context category reads that an expert special educator is able to see the overall picture and alternative approaches, and has a vision of what may be possible in regards to the job duties required of a special educator.

Three expert special education teachers from the selected school participated in this study; pseudonyms were used to protect their confidentiality. The first participant, Ms. Snow, was a female in her early 30s who was of Asian descent. Ms. Snow was co-teaching with a general education teacher in a 9th grade physical science line. She had been teaching special education for six years and had an IEP caseload of 11 students. The second participant, Ms. Harmony, was a female in her early 40s and was Filipino. Ms. Harmony co-taught 9th grade Math and had been a special education teacher for 20 years. She had an IEP caseload of 15 students. The last participant, Ms. Raffy, was also a female in her early 40s. She was Caucasian and had been officially teaching special education for six years. She was co-teaching 9th grade English and had 15 IEP students on her caseload. When referring to the participants' caseloads, the numbers are not inclusive of the total number of students in their classrooms. Their caseloads only represent the number of students for whom they had the responsibility of coordinating the procedures and paperwork related to the evaluation, eligibility, and IEP processes.

About 2,200 students attended the school during the time of the study. A large majority of the student population was of Filipino and Hawaiian ancestry. Approximately 600 students (27%) met the criteria to receive a free and reduced lunch and 232 students (10.5%) were eligible for special education services. The majority of the school's special education population received services under the categories of specific learning disability and other health impairment. The school employed 115 teachers with an average teacher to student ratio of about 1 to 19. Twenty-three of the 115 teachers were special education teachers; 16 of which were highly qualified to teach special education.

Measures and Procedures

We used teacher-kept time journals, transcribed semi-structured audio-taped interviews, detailed observation field notes of teachers in their natural settings, and other documents (e.g., meeting minutes, lesson plans) to collect data on the resources, experiences, supports, behaviors, and skills that these expert special education teachers used to manage all aspects of their jobs.

Time journals and interviews. We asked participating teachers to keep time journals documenting their work-related duties for an entire work week. We asked participants to select a work week that was typical of their job-related duties. The teachers were asked to document their work-related duties from Monday through Friday in 60-minute intervals. At the end of each work day, participants were asked to reflect and comment on their work day in paragraph form.

Interview questions directly addressed the participants' resources, supports, experiences, behaviors, and skills that helped them effectively manage their job demands. We developed the interview questions in an open-ended manner that encouraged participants to respond in narrative form. Questions included but were not limited to: please describe what you do during a typical workday, do you feel like you are able to do everything expected of you as a special educator? Why or why not? How have you been effective in managing your job demands? Tell me about a time when you were effective in successfully carrying out your job demands. The location and time of the interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. The lead author conducted all interviews at the participants' school. Each interview lasted for approximately 30-45 minutes and was audio-taped using a digital recorder.

Observations and artifact documents. Observations involved the lead author shadowing each of the participants for two entire workdays. The observations were conducted on different days than the participants recorded activities in their time journals. During these observations she sat at the back of the classroom and recorded the participants' behaviors related to how they managed their job demands in their natural work environments. Whom the participants interacted with, the length of their behaviors, and location were also recorded during the observations.

In addition to the time journals, we asked participants to provide all documents mentioned in their interviews and time journals as additional corroborating documents. Documents included IEP templates, weekly calendars, and to-do-lists.

Credibility procedures. Data collected for this study were given to second author for the purpose of peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Spall, 1998). The process involved

challenging biases and assumptions, and asking questions about interpretations and under- or over-emphasized points.

Intensive involvement occurred as the lead author spent two entire work days with each participant. The rich data captured through intensive involvement of shadowing participants and transcriptions of interviews were analyzed and compiled in numerical expressions (Maxwell, 2005). For example, participants documented how often and how long they stayed beyond required work hours, allowing us to numerically express how often they stayed beyond required work hours as a strategy to help them manage their job demands.

Furthermore, a focus group meeting was conducted where all participants met with the lead researcher for approximately 60-90 minutes to review preliminary analyses regarding accuracy of interpretation and to clarify and elaborate on emerging themes. This process, also known as respondent validation or member checking, provided a venue for the researchers to minimize the likelihood of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants said and did (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). We used also used additional corroborating documents (e.g., IEP templates, to-do-lists) to triangulate participants' (a) responses to interview questions, (b) observed behaviors, and (c) teacher-kept journals.

Data Analysis

Once collected, we organized data from four sources (transcribed interviews, observation field notes, time journals, and documents) to construct a case study description of each individual teacher. Each participants' words and behaviors were categorized into concepts or emerging themes (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). We then engaged in cross-case analysis to uncover common patterns between participants (Creswell, 2007) by carefully examining the words and actions used by the participants to convey their experiences. Using the constant comparative approach, we attempted to saturate themes until no further information could be found to provide insight into the category (Creswell, 2007). Finally, we coded data according to themes and extracted examples that summarized how participating expert special education teachers identified their job demands and effectively managed them.

Results

As summarized in Table 1, participating expert special educators used a variety of resources and supports, skills, and behaviors and dispositions to manage their multiple job demands.

Table 1
Resources, Supports, Behaviors, Dispositions and Skills that Helped Expert Special Educators Effectively Manage Their Job Demands

Resources & Supports	Skills	Behaviors & Dispositions
-Planning period (e.g., used to hold IEP meeting) -Personnel support (e.g., co-teacher, educational assistant, substitute teacher) -Utilizing teaching tools (e.g., rubrics, assistive technology)	-Effective classroom management strategies -Relevant teaching (e.g., providing real-life examples that students can relate to)	-Working beyond required work hours -Collaboration (e.g., working with co-teacher) -Use of multiple communication methods -Multi-tasking -Empathy and rapport with students -Positive outlook

Resources and Supports
The participants mentioned a variety of resources and supports that assisted them in effectively negotiating their job demands, including using their planning period and supportive school personnel such as co-teachers, educational assistants (EAs), and colleagues to create more time in the day to attend to critical tasks. Additionally, participants used teaching tools such as rubrics and assistive technology to maximize efficient use of time.

Using planning periods and collegial/personnel support to create more time in the day. All three participants utilized their planning periods as a resource to efficiently manage their job demands. They used their planning periods to hold IEP meetings, complete paperwork, communicate with parents, collaborate with colleagues, run class advisor errands (e.g., getting signatures, making decorations for prom), and catch up on emails. Ms. Harmony used her planning period to complete a portion of the school's accreditation report, put posters in her classroom, and collect work for two of her students who were going to be out due to surgery. Ms. Raffy used her planning period to help students with study skills, complete a survey for a federal grant, and make copies.

At times the participants attended IEP meetings, conducted class advisor business, and communicated with parents during class time while their co-teachers ran class. For example, Ms. Snow left class after fifteen minutes to attend a meeting with district personnel to discuss an IEP. Ms. Raffy was also observed attending an IEP meeting while her co-teacher took over the class. Ms. Harmony indicated in her journal that she spent some class time running errands for class advisor business while her co-teacher ran class. Ms. Harmony was also observed stepping out of class to call parents while her co-teacher presented a math lesson. Ms. Raffy explained how her

co-teachers over the years have helped her be more open-minded and have introduced her to more efficient ways of doing things.

Two of the participants used their EAs to help them complete their job demands. Ms. Harmony's EA tutored students after school and helped her to work one-on-one with students who needed additional help in class. She positioned her EA near an unruly group of students in class to minimize behavioral problems and distractions while she taught class. The EA was also utilized to make copies and find a student who cut class. Ms. Raffy had her EA help run errands for class advisor business, redirect students in class, and cover her study skills class while she attended an IEP meeting.

Ms. Harmony was the only participant who got a substitute teacher so that she could complete a variety of job related tasks. Although she had a substitute teacher for the day, she remained at work from 7:30am to 5:00pm. During this time, she worked on school wide initiatives, student evidence binders, sophomore banquet ticket sales, laminating posters for her classroom, writing IEPs, and developing differentiated lesson plans.

Using teaching tools to maximize efficiency. One participant used rubrics and assistive technology to manage her job demands more efficiently and effectively. Ms. Raffy agreed to be a part of an assistive technology pilot project conducted by a local university. As a part of the project, she received a couple of laptops that had a text-to-speech program. She explained how although the program ran slowly at times, it seemed to be beneficial to some of her students who struggled with reading. She talked about how convenient it was to have the books they were reading in class downloaded onto the program and how the students could use the laptops to conduct research. She also used rubrics to grade and commented that "I never used to grade with rubrics, but now I find that I can't do without them, because they speed things up so much."

Skills

The participants exhibited strong classroom management skills, made the content relevant, and drew upon their own experiences to make instruction more efficient and effective for their students.

Classroom management. All three participants appeared to be skilled at managing classroom behavior. They all appeared to be the primary disciplinarian in their co-teaching relationships. Their effective classroom management skills seemed to make one of their primary job duties, teaching groups of diverse students, more achievable.

All three participants used the tone of their voice, gestures, and proximity to redirect students to get back on task. For example, during one instance Ms. Snow positioned herself near an unruly group of students where they could see her tilt her head and use her eyes to communicate. Without saying a word, the students immediately scattered and went back to their seats. Without saying a word, Ms. Harmony stood in front of a class that was unsettled and glared at them quietly; the class took notice and settled down shortly after. These classroom management tactics got the students focused on the task at hand, which seemed to allow the participants to be more effective in delivering the lesson to the students. During another incident, Ms. Snow interrupted a noisy class and her co-teacher with a calm tone that was loud enough for all to hear and told the

class what they should be focused on; the classroom became silent and the co-teacher continued. When students got overly excited about a lab demonstration, Ms. Snow calmly told them to take two steps back and they complied. Students seem to respond to her calm and firm tone. Getting the students focused and settled seemed to help Ms. Snow and her co-teacher get through the lab demonstration more efficiently.

All three participants used grouping and preferential seating strategies to manage classroom behaviors. For example, Ms. Harmony grouped her small study skills class by gender (2 girls in one group and 4 boys in another). She explained that this arrangement helped prevent distractions with the opposite sex; it prevented them from flirting with one another during class time. Ms. Snow separated two students who were distracting each other. To maintain the peace between classmates, Ms. Raffy regrouped students as she saw fit. In addition, Ms. Raffy and her co-teachers split one of their class periods in half due to major behavior issues that she thought stemmed from low reading levels apparent with many of the students in that particular class. She explained how this helped her and her co-teachers better monitor student behavior and afforded them time to work more one-on-one with students to boost their reading levels.

Another effective classroom management skill that all three participants displayed was circulating around the classroom. Ms. Snow constantly circled the room, even when she was giving instruction. Ms. Raffy and Ms. Harmony took turns circling the room with their co-teachers. Circulating around the classroom seemed to help minimize disruptions while the participants delivered instruction to their students.

Ms. Snow often had individual conversations with students who were not focused on the task at hand. She pulled a student to the side who kept talking with a neighbor and spoke with him about his choice of seating himself next to people who distract him. After the talk with Ms. Snow, the student chose to move himself to another seat and appeared to be on task the rest of the class period. During another instance, she pulled another student to the side of the classroom to talk with him about his behavior and the consequences of having to stay after school for her to re-teach him the concept he was missing. She approached another student who appeared to be quiet and removed him from the rest of the class; Ms. Snow sat next to him, talked with him about how his day was going and helped him with a problem.

The structure of Ms. Harmony's class seemed to be a key component to her effective classroom management. Students seemed to know the following routine:

1. Work independently on problems from the previous day's lesson.
2. Teachers model new problems.
3. Students work with one another to try the problems themselves.
4. Teachers do temperature check and re-teach concepts as needed.
5. Assign homework and allow students to begin if time permits.

Students seemed comfortable with this structure and seamlessly moved through the routine. In her Study Skills classes, Ms. Harmony had students fill out a document called "Study Skills Student Accountability" in which they wrote down the work they completed for the day; this self-management strategy seemed to help students stay on task.

Possessing good classroom-management skills appeared to help the participants be more effective at delivering classroom instruction, a primary job duty. Furthermore, being an effective teacher seemed to contribute to the participants' abilities to efficiently juggle other job demands. For example, Ms. Harmony was able to check emails while students worked independently without problematic behaviors.

Relevant teaching. Two of the participants, Ms. Snow and Ms. Raffy, made content relevant to students, which in turn made their teaching more effective and efficient. When Ms. Snow and Ms. Raffy provided real-life examples the students could relate to, the students made gestures and comments that showed they comprehended the subject matter. For example, during a lesson on force and motion Ms. Snow posed the following scenario and question to follow: Same car different driver, one driver is a small Japanese lady and the other is a big Samoan man. Which car will go faster/have an easier time accelerating? With a big smile on her face, the student said "Da small Japanese lady of course Miss." When Ms. Snow asked her why, she answered correctly that the Samoan man is bigger and has more mass. The student was able to take this concept and create her own bumper car example, which she modeled for the class. The student seemed pleased with herself and Ms. Snow did not have to re-teach the concept.

Ms. Raffy was observed making instruction relevant to her students seven different times over the course of two days. She read a short story called "Growing up Local" in Pidgin (also known as Hawaiian Creole English) to a small group of students. They all listened to the story intently and accurately answered questions about the story during discussion. In another period, they read the same story and Ms. Raffy shared her personal story about moving to Hawaii and becoming familiar with Hawaiian culture. She made a joke about pronouncing the street names incorrectly. They laughed and seemed to relate to her and the character in the story. During another class period, she discussed a story called "American Eyes" with the class. Ms. Raffy posed questions such as "How do you think the girl felt when she was told that she stinks like a Korean?" Ms. Raffy got students deeply involved in the discussion by having them think of a time when they were made to feel bad; they were able to use their own experiences to put themselves in the character's shoes.

On another occasion, while describing solar panels to a couple of students in her study skills period, Ms. Raffy discussed uneven sources of energy and related it back to real life by saying "On cloudy days I have to take fast showers." The students got excited about understanding the concept after her comment and tried to chime in all at once. One student said "Oh yeah, because the heat runs out!" Making instruction relevant to students' lives enabled participants to teach effectively and efficiently, allowing students to understand content quickly and eliminating the need to re-teach concepts.

Behaviors and Dispositions

The participants exhibited several behaviors and dispositions that enabled them to juggle their job demands. Behaviors included working beyond required work hours, collaborating and using multiple communication methods, and multi-tasking during study skills class. Developing rapport with students and maintaining a positive outlook were professional dispositions exhibited by the expert teachers.

Working beyond required work hours. The most frequently cited theme was working beyond required work hours. Arriving at work early, using their designated break times (lunch and recess), staying past required work hours, and taking work home was crucial to allowing the participants to manage all aspects of their job demands. Two of the participants regularly arrived 30 to 55 minutes early to work on their job-related tasks. They would use this time to create to-do-lists, read and respond to emails, communicate with parents, and plan lessons. Lunch time and recess were often used by participants to catch up on emails, schedule IEP meetings, develop lessons, communicate with parents, collaborate with colleagues, work with students, and conduct class advisor business. "Unfortunately, recess is too short and is usually spent for last minute things! Students can flock to ask a million clarifying questions!" said Ms. Harmony. Lunch time was rarely used to eat lunch. If participants ate, it was referred to as a working lunch.

All three of the participants indicated that they stayed past required work hours every day. Two of the participants stated that the only way they can complete all of their job requirements is stay past required work hours. The other participant said that she stayed past required work hours because she set a standard for herself to go above and beyond what was required for the sake of her students. The participants typically stayed between one and a half and three hours past their required work time. On one occasion Ms. Harmony worked from 3:00 p.m. to midnight, nine hours past her required work time, to chaperone and clean-up after the sophomore banquet. Staying past required work hours allowed participants to tutor students and provide them with supplemental help in areas where they struggled, and to complete legal paperwork related to re-evaluations and IEPs. Participants also took their work home. One participant, Ms. Raffy, preferred to do paperwork at home because she was free from distractions of the workplace. Ms. Snow said that students' parents called her at home, even while she was cooking dinner for her family, which allowed her to communicate with parents free from work-related distractions.

Communication and collaboration. Communication and collaboration was mentioned by all three participants as helping them meet their job demands. All three were observed collaborating with other teachers before, during, and after class. In addition, they used their planning periods and time before and after school to communicate with other teachers (mainly co-teachers), parents, administrators, and support staff (i.e., counselors, district resource teachers, EAs, and skills trainers). Collaborative discussions focused on student performance, grades, tutoring, instructional strategies, root causes for inappropriate student behaviors, class advisor business, and planning for meetings (i.e., accreditation, Professional Learning Communities, IEPs). Participants also expected to collaborate with other content area teachers in order to successfully teach their IEP students; therefore, they considered themselves teachers of all core content areas including electives.

Participants used multiple communication methods to collaborate with colleagues, administrators, parents, and support staff including email, text messaging, phone, and face-to-face meetings. Ms. Harmony used a communication book and a daily assignment and study skills checklist to communicate with her students' parents and other teachers. All three participants gave parents their personal cell phone numbers to keep open lines of communication. Ms. Snow commented, "I give all my parents my cell number so they call me 24-7." Two participants talked about how parents called them to talk about issues that occur in the home. Listening to parents helped them make connections to what is going on at school and build rapport.

Multitasking. The participants explained that the need to multitask is greater at the secondary level due to the higher caseloads, multiple class periods, class advising, and collaborating with several other content area teachers. The participants were observed multitasking at different times during their work day. During the study skills class, Ms. Snow helped one student with a poster board while going back and forth to help other students with geometry, finding articles for a project, and pre-writing an essay. During this time, she questioned students about answers on worksheets, prompted them to look at bold phrases and pictures in text, showed one student how to print her paper from the laptop, and assisted with spelling. Ms. Snow capitalized on student strengths to help her multitask. For example, she had a student who finished his assignment early help another student with the same assignment.

Ms. Harmony used a portion of her Study Skills period to complete class advisor tasks that included ordering tiaras and contacting a photographer for the upcoming prom. In addition, she created graphic organizers for her class, answered emails, and visited her colleagues' study skills period to see if other students needed assistance with math. She also found pockets of time to speak with a colleague while she answered student questions about tobacco projects, science, math, and video editing. Ms. Raffy described her typical workday as "putting out lots of fires" and Harmony described it as "a whirlwind," because there is always something to do and someone who needs their problems solved. Ms. Raffy mentioned days that were dominated by school wide initiatives and prom business; she expressed how much she missed time spent with students on those types of days.

Two of the participants (Ms. Harmony and Ms. Snow) expressed how at times they did not feel like they could do everything expected of them, because there were just too many things to do. However, prioritizing and multitasking helped them manage their feelings of being overloaded with the many facets of being a special educator. "I try to prioritize, but then I can't fit unknowns into my list of priorities," said Ms. Raffy.

Empathy and rapport with students. Ms. Harmony's and Ms. Snow's students were comfortable telling them just about anything. These teachers also showed that they were able to identify with and understand their students' feelings, both the difficult and positive things they experienced. Ms. Harmony was observed pulling one student who looked sad and lethargic to the side of the classroom near her desk. She asked him if he was alright and she took the time to listen to what he was going through. On one occasion, Ms. Harmony was observed having a heart to heart talk with the entire class. She took some time at the beginning of the class period to talk to them about how much she cared about their success and the belief she had in all of them to succeed. Furthermore, Ms. Harmony provided all her students with a "Student Questionnaire" at the beginning of the school year. The questionnaire prompted students to write about their likes and dislikes in school, hobbies, advice for teachers, and how they learn best. She explained how this questionnaire helped her to understand the students better, which in turn helped her to efficiently meet the needs of her students.

A female student talked with Ms. Snow candidly about her boyfriend and then when Ms. Snow left the room briefly the student said, "She is a good teacher." Another student was observed speaking with Ms. Snow about his sexual orientation and his comfort talking with her about

being gay. Ms. Snow helped this particular student look through his bag full of crumpled papers to find missing assignments. During a conversation with another student it appeared that Ms. Snow knew his family and had the boy's sibling as a prior student. They chatted about his sister and how she was having her first baby shower. Ms. Snow seemed aware of the issues going on in the student's home. During another class period Ms. Snow talked with her students about the upcoming prom. They all seemed excited to tell her about what they were wearing and who they were taking as their dates. Some of them even told her what they were planning to do after prom. On another occasion, a student spoke with her about frustrations he was having living with his aunty. Ms. Snow did not judge him, just took the time to hear him out.

Ms. Raffy seemed to have an increased sense of empathy with her students because she is a parent of two children with disabilities who receive special education and related services. She explained how she can see things from the perspective of both parent and teacher when working with students with disabilities. Ms. Raffy said that her own children's success stemmed from a team that had good working relationships. Ms. Raffy expressed that being a parent of children with disabilities helped her be more efficient when developing IEPs and coordinating multiple cases, because she was already familiar with the process as a parent who sat through many IEP meetings.

With their empathetic nature and ability to establish rapport with students, all participants had students who seemed motivated to learn from teachers who they knew genuinely cared about them. The safe and caring environment they created seemed to make students more receptive to their teaching, which often saved them from having to re-teach concepts, which in turn allowed them more time to focus on other job duties.

Positive outlook. Ms. Harmony found inspiration in being a special educator and portrayed a positive outlook about her job. When asked how she was successful at managing her job duties, Ms. Harmony talked about how she woke up every morning with a cup of coffee, praised herself, and listened to inspirational music. She explained how inspiration was important to her and her co-teachers who spent a portion of their planning time to look for inspirational quotes that reminded them of why they got into teaching in the first place. Ms. Harmony's positive outlook was also seen in the interactions she had with her students.

Ms. Harmony praised one of her students for getting an A. She walked by another student intently doing his math work, smiled at him and said, "Feels good, yeah, when you know how to do 'em." In another class period, she complimented the entire class about how well they understood the lesson, cooperated with one another, and focused. Her tone was melodic in nature; positive and encouraging. Several students smiled and nodded at her as she complimented the class. Ms. Harmony appeared to be quite dynamic when instructing the class; her animated style seemed to command the students' attention. She even had a sense of humor while teaching. For example, she told the students that they were going to learn about "the good 'F word' -- factor." She would motivate the class with positive phrases like "You guys are rocking and rolling in here." Her high energy levels enhanced the positive vibe she gave off. She wrote in her journal that, "At the end of the day, I always feel productive and celebrate small steps! There's always tomorrow, promise of more things to complete!" Her positive outlook and ability to "celebrate the small steps" seemed to help her perceive her multiple job duties as

achievable. Ms. Harmony chunked her job duties into reasonable steps that she could meet, which seemed to motivate her to continue to achieve whatever job duties came her way.

Discussion

Findings from this qualitative study identified resources and supports, skills, behaviors, and dispositions that three expert special education co-teachers used to effectively manage their multiple job demands such that they averted burnout and remained in the field. In this section, we discuss the primary themes identified in the study, limitations of the study, and implications of the findings.

Resources and Supports

The collegial support given to all three participants by their co-teachers contrasts with Billingsley's (2004b) notion that many special educators struggle with their job demands due to a lack of support from their colleagues. Our participants were able to attend IEP meetings, conduct class advisor business, and communicate with parents during class time while their co-teachers ran class. When the participants had other job demands, their co-teachers willingly supported them by covering all aspects of classroom instruction. However, having general education co-teachers cover for special educators so that they could perform non-instructional tasks is far from ideal. Although it does not appear that the three expert special education were relegated to the role of instructional assistants in their inclusive classes, which has been frequently documented in the co-teaching literature (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007), it appears that participants sometimes relegated their co-teachers to being solo teachers in order to meet their multiple job demands. Having supportive co-teachers seems to have contributed to participants' handling of job demands, but it is also possible that the participants' expertise could have contributed to having supportive co-teachers.

Teachers reported that planning time is crucial to helping students succeed in inclusive settings (e.g., Fuchs, 2010). Yet our participants often held IEP meetings, completed paperwork, communicated with parents, caught up on emails, gathered work for sick students, and conducted class advisor business during their planning periods to meet their job demands; which entails sacrificing planning time with colleagues. Again, this situation is less than ideal. Planning time between general and special education teachers should be used to co-plan for instruction, differentiation, and providing specially designed instruction. Using planning time for non-instructional tasks, while effective in providing time for work completion, does not accomplish the collaborative instructional implementation that is the goal of co-teaching (Cook, 2004).

Cook (2004) advocated for use of substitute teachers to enable collaborative planning time for co-teachers. Our participants instead felt they needed the time for paperwork. For example, Ms. Harmony had a substitute teacher handle her instructional responsibilities while she used the time to work on paperwork and other tasks. Other researchers have found that legal paperwork contributes to special education teacher attrition, particularly because it takes away from instructional time spent with students (Billingsley, 2004a; DeMik, 2008). Teachers interviewed by Tschantz and Markowitz (2002) reported that they spent less time doing paperwork related to special education when they had clerical assistance from a paraprofessional. In contrast, two of

our participants used their paraprofessionals to work with students while they completed paperwork and other clerical tasks.

Skills

Good classroom-management skills and making the content relevant created opportunities for our participants to complete other job duties. Washburn-Moses (2005) and Casey et al. (2011) said that managing student behaviors was one of the major daily responsibilities of special educators, and all three participants made managing student behavior a daily focus. They each had a repertoire of effective classroom-management skills (e.g., structure, routine, proximity, redirection, tone of voice) that helped create an effective and efficient learning environment (Washburn-Moses, 2005). It is possible that the rapport participants had with their students contributed to effective classroom management techniques with the students.

All three participants seemed assertive in nature and were skilled at making content relevant to their students, which helped them reach their students effectively and efficiently. Relevant teaching and their assertive nature seemed to help them execute their primary job duty of helping students understand concepts quicker. Assertiveness is associated with effective classroom management (Canter & Canter, 2001); and effective classroom management can lead to more effective and efficient student interactions and instruction. Core instructional competencies, such as classroom management and assertiveness, may serve as foundational skills that are necessary for expert special education teachers to be successful.

Behaviors

Our participants worked beyond required work hours to attend to the many tasks associated with their jobs (e.g., tutor students, check emails, create to-do-lists, work on school accreditation documents, communicate with parents, plan lessons, collaborate with colleagues, and conduct class advisor business; see also Casey, Dunlap, & Davidson, 2011; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). According to Cowne (2005) and Kaff (2004), special educators spend much of their time collaborating and communicating with parents and colleagues. The importance of communication may explain why participants in our study used time before, during, and after school to collaborate with parents and colleagues. Although their devotion to their jobs is admirable, the necessity of consistently accomplishing these tasks before and after their working hours begs the question of whether the requirements of a special educator's job are unrealistic to complete in the designated required work time allotted.

Dispositions

Empathy and positivity helped participants build rapport and made their job demands more manageable. Klis and Kossewska (1996) indicated that empathy could protect teachers against feelings of loneliness and burnout; perhaps providing insight into why the two participants exhibiting empathy have stayed in the field of special education. We speculate that these dispositions enabled the participants to put in the extra hours necessary to accomplish their many and varied tasks. Additionally, students seemed to be more receptive to Ms. Snow and Ms. Harmony's teaching due to the rapport and empathy they shared with students, which prevented them from having to re-teach concepts as much. In addition, Ms. Harmony's positive outlook seemed to help her view her multiple job duties as achievable, and appeared to motivate her to continue chipping away at them.

Limitations

Our study's findings should be considered within the context of a number of important limitations. First, the findings of this study should not be generalized to other special educators or settings. This study targeted a limited number of expert special educators (n=3) from one school who were nominated by their principal and special education department head to participate. The job demands and conditions of special educators may vary greatly by setting (e.g., alternative schools, resource classrooms, fully self-contained settings, grade levels) and between regions. The criteria that we used to identify participants as experts in their field are somewhat subjective. A certified and licensed special educator who has taught for a minimum of six years and meets the criteria derived from Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (1980) skill acquisition model may not be deemed an expert by some (e.g., there may be other factors that qualify a special educator as an expert). Although it has been applied to a variety of fields (e.g., nursing, aircraft pilots), the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980) skill acquisition model was originally proposed to train aircraft pilots and may not be valid for special educators. Finally, the interpretation of findings in this study may reflect the biases of the participants and the researchers. For example, the results may include some gender bias, because all three participants were female. The constructed role perceptions, behaviors, resources, supports, experiences, and skills that were found to be effective in juggling the job demands of a special educator depended heavily on the participants' personal feelings, experiences, and biases.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

In identifying resources, supports, skills, behaviors, and dispositions that our participants used to effectively manage their job demands, we suggest that administrators may want to consider giving more planning and preparation time to special educators teaching in inclusive settings. For example, the participants were allotted planning periods three times per week. They used these planning periods to manage job demands (e.g., completing paperwork, attending IEP meetings) rather than devote this time solely to the critical task of planning, yet they still had to work beyond required work hours on a daily basis. Allotting them a daily planning period may alleviate some of the time they spend completing job duties beyond their required work hours. Allowing them more planning time during the school day may also alleviate the need to use instructional time to collaborate with colleagues. If more time is not available during the instructional day, we recommend that schools provide compensation for teachers for their extra hours worked similar to many Extended-Day Contracts used for other personnel such as coaches.

All of the participants were consistently observed multitasking and working extra hours to complete their job duties. Allowing them more time through increasing time allotted for planning or reducing caseloads could possibly allow special educators to put more of a concentrated effort on specific tasks. For example, special educators could concentrate solely on instructing students rather than checking emails or collaborating with colleagues and parents during instruction time. Providing special educators with substitute teachers to complete job demands may also be helpful. We also recommend that much of the clerical work be performed by paraprofessionals, and qualified licensed teachers deliver instruction. Policymakers may also want to consider increasing the pay of special educators to motivate them to effectively complete their job demands.

When interviewing potential special educators, administrators may want to consider skills and personality traits found in the expert special educators who successfully balance their many job demands and roles. Interviewees who have displayed good classroom management skills, are technologically inclined, are empathetic, and have a positive outlook may be promising special educators. In addition, administrators may want to look at providing professional development in the areas listed above to help their special education teachers improve their craft and effectively manage their tasks.

Researchers may want to further explore the process that one goes through from being a novice special educator to an expert special educator. This will help to provide information to practitioners and administrators on how to develop expertise. It would be interesting to see the impact that being taught by expert special educators has on the academic and functional outcomes of students with disabilities. Furthermore, additional research should be conducted on the relationship between expertise and retention rates in the field of special education.

Lastly, it may be beneficial to further explore whether the time in a traditional school day is enough for special educators to complete all of their job demands. It may be that special educators simply have too many tasks for most individuals to reasonably accomplish, which is a recipe for burnout and attrition. Researchers should look into whether the resources, supports, behaviors, skills, and traits found in this study to help the participants effectively juggle their job demands can be replicated in other regions and settings (elementary versus secondary, fully self-contained versus resource and inclusion). The results of these types of future studies could clarify the job demands of special educators teaching in different settings. It may also be worth exploring how expert special educators might mentor novice special educators in the "unwritten rules" of managing job tasks that are typically not part of a pre-service curriculum.

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