

# Special Educators' Experiences of Interpersonal Interactions While Serving Students With Emotional/Behavioral Disorders

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## Abstract

Students with emotional/behavioral disorders are increasingly included in general education settings, requiring their special educators to coordinate with other educators. Yet, research provides limited insights into their interactions with other educators. Thus, we qualitatively examined how special educators experienced and navigated interactions with other educators when serving students with emotional/behavioral disabilities in self-contained classes that were actively moving students into more inclusive placements. Participants emphasized that their work was interdependent with others; they relied on others for work essential to meeting students' needs. They shared that interactions were shaped by conceptions of students' needs, the division of responsibilities, and resources. They experienced interactions on a continuum from alignment to misalignment; when experiencing alignment, they felt supported to meet student needs, whereas they felt misalignment challenged those efforts. Participants described using varied strategies to promote alignment. Results have implications for coordinating teachers' efforts to serve students with emotional/behavioral disabilities.

## Keywords

emotional & behavioral disorders, exceptionalities, personnel preparation, teacher(s)

Students with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) are increasingly learning in general education settings (Williamson et al., 2019). Consistent with broader trends (Williamson et al., 2019), the proportion of students with EBD in general education settings for >80% of the day increased from 24.9% in 1997 to 47.1% in 2015, whereas the proportion of students in separate settings for the majority of their day declined (see online supplemental Figure A; Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2018). Students' movement from self-contained into general education settings substantially changes the roles of special education teachers (SETs), requiring that they engage in more intensive coordination with other educators (Bettini et al., In press). For example, Klingner and Vaughn (2002) examined how a SET's role changed as her school moved students into general education placements, and they found that her interactions with colleagues became much more frequent and intensive as she worked with colleagues to ensure students received needed services and accommodations across settings.

Furthermore, increasing movement from self-contained into general education settings has corresponded with other initiatives to increase coordination of teachers' work in schools (e.g., multitiered systems of supports, collaborative professional development [PD]; Johnson, 2015). The

traditional "egg crate" model (Lortie, 1975, p. 14), in which teachers acted in isolation, has given way to school structures that depend on educators coordinating their work (Johnson, 2015). This shift includes SETs, who must coordinate with others to ensure students with disabilities receive well-aligned services across settings (Brownell et al., 2010).

Given the increasing movement of students with EBD from self-contained into general education settings (Williamson et al., 2019) and increasing coordination of teachers' work in schools (Johnson, 2015), scholars posit SETs' roles serving students with EBD may increasingly require providing "support and guidance to general

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educators” and “coordinating . . . efforts across related service providers” (Farmer et al., 2016, p. 177). However, research provides limited insight into how SETs experience interactions with other educators or how they navigate these interactions, particularly in service of students with EBD (Bettini et al., 2017).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore SETs’ experiences of interactions with other educators, and how they describe navigating these interactions, in schools in which students with EBD are actively moving from self-contained settings to general education settings. Note that our study is not designed to evaluate the benefits or disadvantages to increasing general education placements for students with EBD, nor are we trying to understand how SETs’ interactions with colleagues facilitate inclusion. Rather, we aim to understand how SETs experience and navigate interactions with other educators—an aspect of their work that has likely been intensified by these changes to how schools are organized to serve students with EBD. Understanding SETs’ experiences can provide insights into their roles, which, in turn, has implications for how SETs are prepared and supported to fulfill those roles effectively. This is especially important given evidence that these SETs often experience insufficient preparation and support to fulfill their roles (e.g., Billingsley et al., 2006; O’Brien et al., 2019).

### *Conceptual Foundations: Schools as Social Organizations*

Schools are “fundamentally social organizations characterized by social psychological processes” (Youngs et al., 2012, p. 249), in which a “complex web of social exchanges” form “the basic operations of schools” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 20). Teachers engage with their social context in agentic ways, using strategic social means to pursue aims, but both their aims and strategies are shaped by the social context (Li & Ruppap, 2021).

SETs spend substantial time interacting with other educators (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010), and they report interacting with colleagues is core to their roles, especially when students are in general education settings, where they are just one of many educators responsible for their students (e.g., Ruppap et al., 2017). Yet, few studies have investigated SETs’ experiences of and responses to these interactions. Most extant research addressing this issue has focused on co-teachers; these studies find SETs’ expertise is often marginalized, as they often act as a “glorified assistant” to co-teachers (Jackson et al., 2017, p. 14; Scruggs et al., 2007). Due to differences in other educators’ attitudes to and expectations of students with disabilities, SETs often report experiencing tension in collegial interactions (Garwood et al., 2018). Tension often centers on the best way to meet student needs, via placement (e.g., Otis-Wilborn et al., 2005), providing accommodations (e.g.,

Griffin et al., 2008), and instructional foci (e.g., Russell & Bray, 2016).

Few researchers have examined how SETs respond to these tensions. These studies find they do actively respond (Li & Ruppap, 2021), using varied strategies, such as identifying common ground, developing tools to guide their work together, dividing responsibilities (Pratt, 2014), and teaching others about their students (Bettini et al., 2019). For example, Gomez-Najarro (2020) found that, in elementary schools using Response to Intervention, SETs leveraged informal relationships to ensure their input was considered in assessment and intervention for students in Tier 2, even when they were not formally part of Tier 2 decision-making processes.

However, only one study has examined SETs’ experiences of interpersonal interactions when serving students with EBD. Examining four SETs’ experiences of their roles in self-contained classes for students with EBD, Bettini et al. (2019) found SETs felt isolated from colleagues, and that colleagues did not understand their roles. Thus, SETs described actively teaching others about their jobs. Bettini et al.’s study focused on schools where students received most or all instruction in self-contained classes, and their isolation was partly a function of being their students’ sole teacher (Bettini et al., 2019). Their findings may or may not apply in settings where students with EBD are actively moving into general education settings.

Thus, we aimed to investigate how SETs experience and navigate interpersonal interactions with other educators, in contexts oriented toward moving students into general education settings. We specifically investigated the following research questions:

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What do SETs describe as shaping their interpersonal interactions with other professionals in self-contained settings for students with EBD where students are actively moving into general education settings?

**Research Question 2 (RQ2):** How do SETs describe their experiences of these interactions?

**Research Question 3 (RQ3):** How do SETs describe navigating these interactions?

### **Method**

Because of limited prior research and theory regarding how SETs experience and navigate interpersonal interactions, we relied on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2014), which allowed us to generate theory based on insider perspectives from stakeholders with greatest insight into the phenomena: SETs serving students with EBD. From a constructivist epistemological stance, researchers construct a response to research questions from participants’ perspectives, without imposing previously identified categories onto data, allowing findings to emerge inductively from data (Charmaz, 2014).

**Table 1.** Participants and Contexts.

School Characteristics				Teacher Characteristics			
School	% Economically Disadvantaged	% Racial/Ethnic Diversity		Pseudonym	Years Teaching	Race	Gender
A	11.6	African American: 1.5 Asian: 6.5 Hispanic: 9.5 Native American: 0 White: 78.9	Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander: 0 Multirace, non-Hispanic: 3.6	Amelia	3–5	White	Female
B	13.9	African American: 2.6 Asian: 0 Hispanic: 2 Native American: 0 White: 92.3	Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander: 0 Multirace, non-Hispanic: 3.1	Betty	3–5	White	Female
E	10.6	African American: 0.2 Asian: 0.5 Hispanic: 3.4 Native American: 0 White: 94.9	Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander: 0 Multirace, non-Hispanic: 1	Eve	3–5	White	Female
F	6.9	African American: 1 Asian: 6.3 Hispanic: 4.6 Native American: 0.3 White: 84.9	Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander: 0 Multirace, non-Hispanic: 3	Fiona, Greta	Fiona: 3–5 Greta: >10	White	Female

### Context and Participants

We conducted the study in a Northeastern U.S. state where 18% of students have disabilities, and 1.7% of all students receive special education services under the emotional disturbance label. Consistent with national trends, students with disabilities in this state are increasingly served in general education (66% in 2018 vs. 36% in 2003). We conducted the study in four elementary schools in four districts (Table 1). These schools were part of a larger study, which included six elementary schools that housed self-contained programs for students with EBD. After reviewing field notes from observations and interviews with staff from all six schools, we focused on the four schools that emphasized increasing students' time in general education settings. In all four schools, students with EBD had a general education home-room and spent varied portions of time in general education and self-contained classes. In all four programs, educators were gradually increasing the time some students spent in general education. A participant, 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.

Movement into general education was not a linear process; in all programs, some students' behaviors led teachers to reduce time in general education, temporarily or on a long-term basis. For example, Betty said one student was in her self-contained classroom,

about 60% of his day . . . Challenging times, we'll always plan for him to be in here. And then sometimes we'll . . . say . . . "Alright, your body is really not ready, so you're going to stay down here."

However, multiple data sources indicated the aim was to eventually move students fully into general education. Note that none of the SETs co-taught or provided instruction in general education classes; rather, they worked with general educators and paraprofessionals, who supported students in general education, and they provided instruction in separate settings.

### Program Descriptions

School A's program enrolled students from four grades. Amelia, the SET, was certified and had a master's in special education. Her program employed three full-time paraprofessionals and she could access the school counselor on request. A district board certified behavior analyst (BCBA) consulted with her (see Table 1 for more participant information).

School B's program enrolled students from three grades. Betty, a SET, was certified and had a master's in special education. Her program employed two to five paraprofessionals (adding more as the year progressed and the number of students increased) and a full-time school counselor.

Eve and another SET co-led District E's program, each teaching different grades. Eve is certified and was pursuing a master's in special education. Her program employed a full-time school counselor and she supervised four paraprofessionals.

Greta and Fiona co-led District F's program, which enrolled students from four grades. Greta is a certified SET and a BCBA (see Note 2). Fiona is a certified SET. They both had master's degree in special education. Their program also employed a part-time counselor, four full-time paraprofessionals, and two part-time paraprofessionals. A district BCBA consulted with them.

### Data Collection

We collected data as part of a larger study, which included several other data sources. For the present analysis, site selection was informed by field observations and stakeholder interviews, but we focused on semi-structured interviews with SETs. Consistent with our inductive approach (Charmaz, 2006), we conceptualized interviews as "directed conversation[s]" (p. 25), in which "ideas and issues emerge during the interview and interviewers can immediately pursue these leads" (p. 29). We conducted three interviews ( $\cong$  45 min each;  $>2$  hr/SET total) with each SET, in the beginning, middle, and end of the 2017–2018 school year. The first began with direct (e.g., *What are your goals for students?*) and indirect (e.g., *How do you know when you've had a good day?*) questions about how SETs conceptualized the purposes of their work. Subsequent questions asked about working conditions from Bettini et al.'s (2016) conceptual framework, including demands and social and logistical supports. Interview protocols were not designed to probe how SETs navigated interactions, but SETs often initiated conversational turns highlighting their approaches to navigating interactions. Consistent with an inductive approach, we used probing questions (e.g., *Can you tell me more?*) to follow their leads and deliberately asked about these interactions in subsequent interviews.

In the first interview, Eve, Fiona, and Greta shared extensive, rich perspectives. In contrast, Betty was guarded in her first interview; we had not yet established rapport. By the second, we had observed her several times, facilitating rapport and more extensive responses. Amelia was open in her first interview, but a school event cut it short, and it was her first year in her school, so she did not yet know her school well. Thus, we added Betty's and Amelia's second interviews to the analytic data set. We reviewed all interviews with all SETs, and confirmed that other interviews supported, but did not extend or elaborate findings. We thus concluded that we had reached theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014) with the present data sources (i.e., Interview 1 with Eve, Fiona, & Greta; Interviews 1 & 2 with Amelia & Betty).

### Analysis

We analyzed data using constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). Analysis proceeds through

four iterative, inductive phases, each of which moves analysis to a higher level of abstraction: initial coding, focused coding, theoretical coding, and theory development (Charmaz, 2014). In all phases, researchers use constant comparison, between and within participants, to understand how codes relate to one another, using memos to trace relationships. We approached this process collaboratively, such that two or more researchers coded each transcript at each phase, and we then debriefed with one another, querying analytic conclusions, to ensure findings were grounded in data, not in preconceived understandings.

In initial coding, we were open to all possible meanings in data, coding each unit of meaning using all labels that could be inferred to apply. For example, we coded Fiona's quote, "Some of [the] teachers had different expectations for our students," using codes reflecting many possible interpretations (e.g., *tension with others*, *differences of opinion*, *expectations, our students*, *difficulty collaborating*). We divided transcripts among the team, with two of us coding each transcript, memo-ing about analytic concepts, and then bringing concepts to the team.

We used memos during open coding to collaboratively develop focused codes. For example, based on open codes of data in which participants described divergent perspectives between themselves and others, we developed a focused code, *tensions*, and subcodes about sources of tension. We iteratively applied these focused codes to the data, engaged in peer debriefing, and revised the codes. For example, after coding using the focused codes, we revised the *tensions* code to capture SETs' responses to tensions, and we collapsed codes differentiating among kinds of positive interactions (e.g., *collaboration*, *coordination*, *support*), as these were not clearly differentiated from one another in the data.

While focused coding, we began developing shared understandings of how codes related to one another; this informed theoretical coding, when we developed more abstract codes. For example, focused codes *tensions* and *collaboration* were explained by the degree of alignment between participants' and others' perspectives; thus, we developed a theoretical code, *mis/alignment* to explain how differences in perspective shaped SETs' experiences. Using theoretical codes, we coded interviews multiple times, varying our approach to support us in comparing within and across transcripts. For example, we divided transcripts among the team, so each team member coded all theoretical codes in a transcript; we then divided codes among researchers, so each team member coded a single code across all transcripts. This deepened our understandings of codes, how they operated across transcripts, and how they related to one another.

Through this process, we began developing a figure depicting how data responded to the research questions. We iteratively refined the figure during theoretical coding and analytic writing. Moving between the figure and results

helped us clarify and refine the theory, ensuring the data supported it. Through this process, we also identified a core theme.

*Trustworthiness and credibility*

*Peer debriefing.* Peer debriefing was ongoing throughout analysis. We met at each stage to discuss emerging analytic ideas, continuing analysis until we reached consensus about codes and their meanings. If we could not reach consensus, we exchanged transcripts and kept coding until we could articulate assertions that we all agreed represented the data accurately.

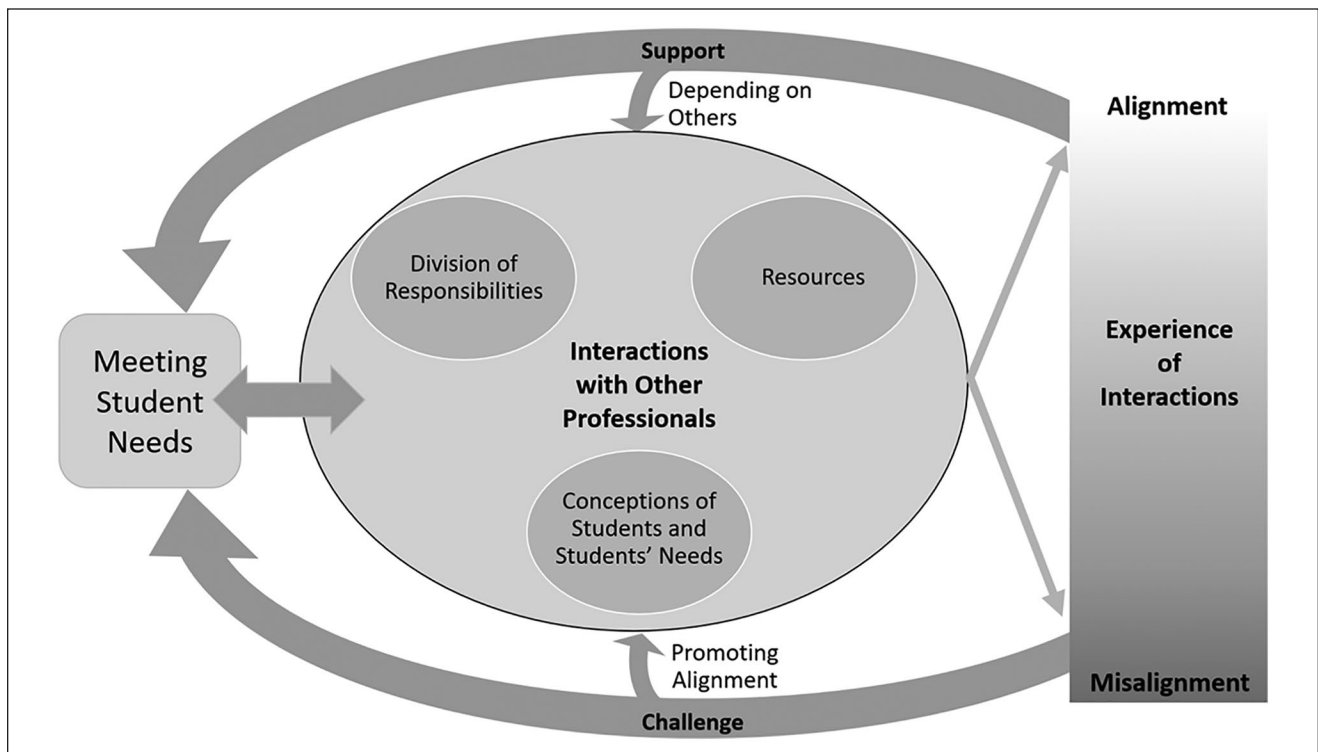
*Positionality.* All researchers are White, including four women and one man. We all have experience as SETs serving students with EBD in varied settings (i.e., inclusive classes, self-contained classes, therapeutic schools, a wilderness school). We all have earned or are earning a doctorate, with shared interests in SETs’ working conditions. Our deep familiarity with SETs’ experiences helped us build rapport and elicit authentic perspectives in interviews. However, it also created potential for findings to reflect preconceptions. Using peer debriefing, we questioned whether data supported interpretations, holding ourselves accountable for basing conclusions on data while seeking and discussing disconfirming evidence to ensure any finding aligned with preconceptions had to “earn its way” into our results (Charmaz, 2006, p. 68).

*Member checking.* We shared results with SETs multiple times during analysis. They all said we accurately represented their experiences. Three SETs offered minor feedback on wording (e.g., Greta felt a phrase she used was too harsh), and we made edits accordingly.

*External auditing.* We submitted results to the fifth author, a member of the larger research team who was intimately familiar with all data sources, but who was not part of the analytic team. She read results critically, concluding that the data supported the theory and assertions. In some cases, she noted quotes that needed more explanation to retain SETs’ original meaning; we edited accordingly. She also confirmed that we had reached theoretical saturation—that other interviews supported, but did not extend or elaborate, the findings.

**Findings**

SETs reported that their role was fundamentally interdependent with other professionals (the core theme), as illustrated in Figure 1. They felt their interactions were shaped (RQ1) by conceptions of students with EBD and their needs, the division of responsibilities for their students, and the resources needed to meet student needs. SETs experienced interactions (RQ2) as reflecting alignment or misalignment between their own and other professionals’ perspectives regarding the same factors that drove their interactions (i.e., conceptions of students and students’ needs, division of responsibilities for meeting those needs, resources needed



**Figure 1.** Grounded theoretical model: Special educators’ experiences of and responses to interpersonal interactions with other educators.

to meet those needs). They felt alignment/misalignment yielded either support for or challenge to meeting students' needs. SETs described navigating interactions (RQ3) using a variety of strategies, generally by increasing reliance on professionals with whom they experienced alignment or by attempting to promote alignment with those with whom they felt misaligned.

Centering participants' perspectives, we first describe the core theme. We then describe each factor SETs perceived as driving interactions (RQ1), and experiences of misalignment and alignment regarding each factor (RQ2). Finally, we present how SETs reported navigating these interactions (RQ3). We conclude with an example synthesizing across research questions.

### *Core Theme: Interdependence*

SETs' descriptions of serving students with EBD were interwoven with references to their interdependence with other educators. Responsibilities for serving students were shared among general educators, administrators, paraprofessionals, and others (e.g., counselors). Thus, in contrast to prior studies documenting isolation among SETs serving students with EBD in self-contained settings (e.g., Bettini et al., 2019; O'Brien et al., 2019), participants described their work as fundamentally interactive with and dependent on a network of colleagues who play crucial roles in serving their students. They described their interactions with other educators as being shaped by (a) conceptions of students' needs; (b) how responsibilities for meeting needs were divided among educators in their school; and (c) the resources available to them and their colleagues. They experienced interactions along a continuum from alignment (experiencing shared perspectives) to misalignment (experiencing differing perspectives).

### *Factors Shaping Interactions*

*Participants' conceptions of students with EBD and their needs.* Participants' conceptions of their students' needs, as students with EBD, informed their interactions with others. All participants conceptualized students as having a disability that affected them but did not define them. They noted that EBD can be difficult, but important, to recognize as a disability. As such, participants described the importance of other educators understanding their students' strengths and challenges and demonstrating positive regard for their students, regardless of student behaviors. For example, Greta explained the importance of "looking at the kids as actually human beings," because "the behavior and the human being are two separate things." Eve described the additional energy and focus it might take one of her students "just to sit in the chair and complete this worksheet." She felt EBD could be difficult to recognize compared with a reading

disability ("it's easier to see that") but that it was important know that students are not "noncompliant just because they feel like it."

SETs also conceptualized students as needing skills and supports to succeed in general education classes. They emphasized varied practices and approaches to meeting students' needs, all of which informed their interactions with others. For example, Betty emphasized the need for consistency across environments (so students can "generalize the skills that they learn in [self-contained settings]"), so she joined the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Committee to promote consistency across the school.

Finally, participants conceptualized students as needing flexible access to the general education environment and curriculum; maintaining this access was an important driver of interactions with other educators. While participants valued inclusion for their students, all felt there were times when students were unable to participate in general education classes because of their behavior and that it was necessary (for both physical and psychological safety) for students to remain in the self-contained setting. During these times, participants interacted with others to maintain access to the general education curriculum. For example, Betty explained how, when students were not able to be in their general education classroom, she would just "flip a switch and all the work comes down here."

*(Mis)alignment regarding conceptions of students with EBD and their needs.* Participants experienced misalignment when they felt others' conceptions of students with EBD and their needs substantively conflicted with their own. Sometimes, they noted other educators held starkly negative perspectives on their students, as when Greta described colleagues who perceived her students as "spoiled or . . . entitled." Often, participants described how others held misconceptions that were not negative but that they felt did not reflect an accurate understanding of students' disabilities. For example, Amelia described colleagues as "not really knowing that our kids have a disability. And thinking that they kinda turn it on and turn it off when they want to." These perspectives were often conveyed through interactions around student behavior. For example, Greta shared how, when she was injured by a student, "Everyone was like, 'Well, aren't you mad?' and I'm like, 'No.' Why would I be mad? It was an *accident*. It was an escalated state . . . How could I be mad at him?" When EBD manifested in disruptive behaviors, others' assumptions about these behaviors often led to misalignment.

Participants also described interactions in which others questioned participants' approach to serving students or pushed for approaches they felt did not address student needs. Sometimes misalignment related to specific practices: For example, Greta described her colleagues' rigid

thinking regarding token systems, saying she felt the need to remind them, “Research shows . . .” Often, experiences of misalignment related to varying perspectives on when students should be in general education and the supports they needed to be successful there. For example, Eve felt students were successful because of support, so removing it too quickly would be counterproductive. She explained, “People see, ‘Oh, they are making progress, let’s push them to the next level.’ I’m like ‘Whoa, calm down.’” Amelia described misalignment regarding students’ placement, as she wanted to “Keep my chicks in the nest for a long time, learn the skills and then let them fly” but noted that “Some views are different around here.” She worried that pushing students into general education settings before they were ready would be counterproductive.

In contrast, participants described experiencing alignment when interactions with others revealed shared perspectives on students and how to meet student needs. For example, Eve described how students should feel “unconditionally cared about” and noted how with some general educators “you feel it when you walk into their room, they love my kids.” Betty described how her principal’s interactions with her class, such as being “really present,” being “flexible,” and “checking in with our students,” communicated that he understood their needs. Similarly, Greta shared how the district BCBA, Grace, really “know[s] the child,” saying, “She’d change into her workout clothes . . . she would be part of the behavior, the de-escalation process, help out, give people breaks . . . she’d make sure she built up a trusting relationship with the kids.” Through interactions, Grace communicated a shared perspective on students and students’ needs.

#### *Interdependent division of responsibilities with other educators.*

To ensure students were flexibly and adequately supported in general education, SETs depended on colleagues to understand and help meet their students’ needs. Their understandings of the division of responsibilities among various educators often drove their interactions with others, including general educators, administrators, paraprofessionals, and partners.

**General educators.** SETs depended on, and therefore interacted with, general educators to facilitate access to curricula, support behavior management, and maintain a consistent schedule. Information about curricula was a primary concern because they wanted to be able to support instruction and keep students on pace with their general education class, even when behavior prevented them from attending the general education classroom. For example, Amelia described interacting with a student’s general educators to support reading instruction. She explained, “We talk at least once a week . . . , and she lets me know what they’re doing for the week ahead.” SETs also discussed listening and responding to general educators’ concerns and training them to respond to student behavior. For

example, Betty said she tried to be “in the school community as much as possible” to help others better support her students. SETs also described coordinating their own and their students’ schedules with those of the general educators with whom they worked. For example, Eve described negotiating with a general educator to plan for a student to have “a half hour in the morning for his meds to kick in and for him to do a routine for him to move” because without this time, “you’re not going to have a good day.”

**Paraprofessionals.** Paraprofessionals attended general education with students; thus, participants described interacting with paraprofessionals to manage schedules, train and support them to enact behavior plans, and gain information about students’ success in their classes.

In coordinating paraprofessionals’ schedules, SETs considered several factors. They tried to maintain consistency so students would see the same person at set times in the day, yet schedules often had to be adjusted due to behavior crises or staff absences, requiring frequent communication. They also reported considering paraprofessionals’ skills and training in relation to student needs when making scheduling decisions. For example, Amelia reported assigning “easier students” to a long-term substitute paraprofessional, who was not Safety Care trained. SETs also tried to protect paraprofessionals’ contractual “15 minute break and . . . half hour [lunch] break” (Eve), which required them to fill in for paraprofessionals during these times.

Because paraprofessionals attended general education with students, SETs depended on them to manage behavior. In general education, Greta said, paraprofessionals are “collecting data, they’re doing token boards, DRO [see Note 3] boards.” Even when they were not enacting specific practices, paraprofessionals kept “eyes on” (Amelia) students, without which most students “can’t go to inclusion all day” (Greta). Thus, SETs interacted with paraprofessionals to provide training and ensure they had resources to enact behavior plans. For example, Fiona said, “We have team meetings . . . we go through . . . logistics . . . for our kids’ behavioral support plans.”

SETs also described maintaining morale among paraprofessionals by providing positive feedback, including paraprofessionals in decisions, framing difficult behavior positively, and having fun together. For example, Greta said, “I praise them a lot.” Fiona described how informal interactions helped with morale:

Just being able to laugh at something at the end of the day is huge . . . we all can turn to each other at the end of a behavior . . . and . . . laugh about it.

**Partners.** Betty, Eve, Fiona, and Greta depended on colleagues whose expertise and full-time role in their program positioned them as partners in running the program. Betty’s and Eve’s partners were full-time school counselors;

Fiona and Greta were each other's partners and they also worked closely with a school counselor. Partners' formal roles varied, but they all described depending on partners to share core responsibilities, and thus interacting with them to trade tasks and make programmatic decisions. For example, Betty described coordinating with her program's counselor to process behaviors in consistent ways, sharing an example of how, after discussing a behavior with a student, "I went to Brook . . . like, 'This is what I did . . .' We're always . . . bouncing off of each other just to make sure . . . we're both in the know." Of note, Amelia had no partner. She relied on her school counselor, Anna, in crises, but Anna was only in the program part-time and did not have a consistent proactive role in running the program.

**Administrators.** Administrators' roles positioned them as gatekeepers to personnel and material resources, decision makers in students' placement, and sources of support for crises.

As a result, participants interacted with administrators to ensure administrators understood the program's unique needs and helped them access the resources they needed. For example, participants felt it was important for administrators to understand the staffing needed for students to safely and consistently participate in general education. Fiona, Greta, and Amelia also described depending on administrators to make decisions about student entry into and exit from their programs, and thus interacted with them around these decisions. Greta said, "We have no entrance or exit criteria, it's basically when the administration says, 'Okay, we have enough [students].'" Finally, Amelia described depending on administrators to help in crises; she described the principal "helping de-escalate a child or . . . physically be[ing] there."

**(Mis)alignment regarding the division of responsibilities.** Participants often described how interactions revealed misalignment when others did not share their understandings of their respective roles in meeting student needs. Eve provided an example of how an interaction with general educators revealed misalignment about her role: "They'll say, 'Oh, well, the other sped teacher pulls them for 30 minutes for reading . . . so you should be doing that [as] well.' You know, I can't do everything." Similarly, Amelia said,

What's tough is sometimes people don't understand the day-in . . . day-out . . . . It could be . . . two people doing this . . . the grades . . . curriculum planning . . . data collection and . . . just physical presence during the day. It's tough . . . I don't know if they [administrators] get it, because it's so much for one person to do.

Amelia felt administrators' expectations were misaligned with what she believed was possible.

In some cases, SETs said the boundaries between their colleagues' roles and their own were a source of misalignment.

For example, Betty had an ongoing difference of opinion, with her school counselor, Brook, about the nature of their respective roles:

Academics are super important to me as a special ed teacher because it's my role . . . she comes from . . . more of a counseling perspective. So, it's also about figuring out . . . what my role is versus her role.

Betty felt her role differed from Brook's, but felt Brook wanted them both to de-prioritize academics. Amelia felt her role as a teacher was sometimes usurped by a district BCBA, Abby. Because she knew students best, she felt she should be a key decision maker about them; however, interactions in team meetings led her to feel others did not see her this way. She said,

Abby's not here very much . . . [but] she seems to have more input in some . . . decisions than me. . . . I sat in a 3-year evaluation . . . and everyone spoke and no one asked my opinion . . . I was pissed . . . I said something to [the principal] about it, actually, and she said, "Well, that's . . . 3-years [evaluations], so there are all the assessments . . ." I'm like, "Yeah, but I'm with her [the student] every single day."

At other times, SETs did experience alignment regarding responsibilities. For example, Eve often alluded to responsibilities her school's counselor, Emmalyn, took on, communicating her belief that she and Emmalyn held shared understandings of their differentiated roles, with Emmalyn "in charge of . . . referrals and stuff like that. I love it, I don't want anything to do with it . . . so Emmalyn is . . . in that position where she's . . . running . . . meetings . . . . I really like that she's in that position." Because they were aligned about their roles, demands were taken off Eve's shoulders. Similarly, Greta described how the division of responsibilities between herself and Fiona allowed them to better serve students. She explained, "Managing behaviors in itself is a full-time job" and their program "has been working successfully because . . . when I'm [addressing a behavior] . . . Fiona can still instruct the students and we don't feel like we're doing a disservice" to students.

**Resources.** Finally, all SETs indicated resources (or lack thereof) shaped interactions with others.

**Physical resources.** Participants described interacting with others when they lacked resources needed to serve students. For example, when Betty found out she was getting a new student for whom she had no curriculum, she "went around asking some of the grade level teachers, and they immediately gave me . . . all these extra things that I needed."

Fiona's and Greta's class location positioned students' behavior as visible to or hidden from others, shaping the kinds of interactions they had with others regarding behavior. Fiona said their class had previously been next to the office, resulting in "a lot of attention," with other teachers



“questioning, ‘Oh, what’s happening with this child?’” They moved to a more private space, reducing questions, but also reducing supportive interactions:

It’s nice, it’s very quiet . . . . There’s some days where I feel even more removed . . . now no one knows what’s going on here and . . . we would like someone to check-in . . . when you’re having an intensive behavior, “Hey! Do you need a bathroom break? Do you need to step out and get some water?” And I feel like that’s happens less now.

**Human resources.** Perceptions of others’ knowledge shaped interactions, as participants reported seeking out more knowledgeable colleagues. For example, Fiona worked “with [a Wilson certified teacher], talking about what she’s working on so . . . I can carry [those skills] over when I’m working with [my student].” By contrast, they described reducing interactions with less knowledgeable colleagues. For example, Greta said she would rather “just go without for the day” than have a substitute paraprofessional who did not know students and routines.

**Time.** SETs described how time limited interactions with others. Fiona said time to meet with one another was something she and Greta “struggle[d] with daily.” Time also constrained interactions with general educators. Amelia said she “talk[ed] once a week,” with general educators, on an ad hoc basis. Similarly, Eve described catching a teacher in the hallway and doing a check-in with the teacher “for 7 minutes.” Time was also a barrier to training. For example, Eve said her paraprofessionals “are only paid to stay for a certain amount of time,” during which they were supervising students, limiting time for training.

**(Mis)alignment regarding resources.** SETs described experiencing alignment and misalignment regarding human and physical resources needed to serve students. For example, they expressed concern about administrators’ understanding of their staffing needs, particularly regarding the need for paraprofessionals to facilitate students’ participation in general education classes. Eve said her program’s staffing needs were “not really . . . . believed” because “there’s pressure from above to not hire . . . a million people.” She expressed confusion about this disbelief: “I don’t know why I would ever want to . . . have [more paraprofessionals] there if it wasn’t necessary . . . . It’s a lot to manage.” Amelia similarly said, “I feel like we need more staff . . .,” but her administrators’ response, sending temporary “staff filler,” was counterproductive, leading her to question, “I’m not sure if there is . . . 100% knowledge of what the program needs.” Fiona and Greta reported misalignment regarding physical resources, as administrators did not prioritize fixing their safe space

even after Greta was injured due to a problem with its construction. Fiona said, “Things . . . would have happened differently had they . . . listened to us in the first place.” Greta said,

After that [injury] . . . happened, that [problem with the safe space] should have been freaking off . . . and [the principal is] like . . . “Not anytime soon . . . wait for that consultant to come in.”

These interactions communicated to Fiona and Greta that others did not understand the safety measures required to support students with EBD.

At times, SETs reported experiencing alignment regarding resources. Betty shared how her principal’s understanding of staffing needs was aligned with hers, as evidenced by his response when a paraprofessional quit: “He got right on it.” Similarly, when asked whether she felt her principal understood her program’s needs, Fiona responded, “They did hire a full-time adjustment counselor in our building, which has been amazing.”

### *Experiences of Alignment and Misalignment Shaped Efforts to Meet Students Needs*

As described above, SETs experienced alignment and misalignment with other educators regarding student needs, the division of responsibilities for student needs, and the resources necessary to meet student needs. When they experienced alignment, SETs felt their efforts to meet student needs were supported. For example, Fiona’s and Greta’s alignment with administrators regarding the need to move their class’s location improved their capacity to meet students’ needs. Fiona said, after “a wonderful meeting . . . about . . . the needs of the classroom,” they moved the class to a more private space, which “really improved the education” they could provide. Eve’s alignment with the school counselor allowed her to be more emotionally responsive to students. She explained how they had established shared understandings of their roles in supporting one another during emotionally difficult moments: “We always say . . . to everybody . . . ‘If you need to step out, you need to,’” and she made use of the counselor’s support when she needed to take a brief break. Shared understandings of their roles in supporting one another enabled her to regulate her emotions and meet student needs.

In contrast, SETs said misalignment challenged their efforts to meet student needs. For example, Amelia experienced misalignment regarding resources. Whereas Amelia felt she lacked the specialized curricular resources she needed to provide reading instruction to one of her students, her principal assumed that “he’s in a specialized program, so he should be getting that.”

However, Amelia pointed out that because “the specialized [behavior] program isn’t for reading,” she was not provided the time or resources to provide the reading instruction the student needed. She also described how “We need more support, like consistent, not just crisis-mode support . . . if we want our kids to not just be maintained,” but to make progress. She felt that people assisting with crisis management needed to “be building those relationships with the kids” to be effective, but believed her principal thought sending ad hoc “staff filler” during crises was sufficient. Misalignment regarding the demands on her, and the resources needed to meet those demands, led to a situation in which she felt essential student needs went unmet.

Betty felt misalignment regarding students’ need for social-emotional instruction negatively affected students’ progress in acquiring and generalizing social-emotional skills:

I think there are blocks of times during the day [for social skills instruction across the school], but I don’t know if they’re necessarily always . . . utilized . . . I think sometimes it just leads to a lack of understanding . . . a more difficult time helping our students . . . generalize the skills . . . As much as we try to keep all the expectations the same . . . sometimes I find that our expectations can be different than the classroom’s.

She provided examples of how differences in responses to behavior affected her students:

If our students were to put their hands on anyone . . . we use specific language . . . we always make sure that there’s . . . a time for them to write an apology note . . . but not all classroom teachers do the same thing, and sometimes they’ll just speak to the student and then move along . . . there’s loss of a time to process what’s happened, why that might have happened.

### *Experiences of (Mis)Alignment Shaped Future Interactions*

Because of their deep interdependence with others, SETs could not simply withdraw from interactions with others with whom they were misaligned; they needed to continue meeting student needs even in contexts where they were dependent on others who did not share their conceptions of students’ needs, the division of responsibilities for meeting student needs, or the resources necessary to meet student needs. SETs thus described interacting with others strategically, making deliberate choices about whom to interact with and for what purposes. When they experienced misalignment, they described using external strategies to improve alignment, and internal strategies to attempt to meet student needs despite misalignment. They further described several considerations shaping what strategies they employed in different situations.

*Choosing with whom to interact.* SETs described choosing to interact with others with whom they had positive prior interactions. For example, Greta recounted a strong history with a district BCBA, Grace; as such, Greta chose to ask her for advice, saying she would “call [Grace], like, ‘Alright I need you to come over. We need to put our heads together.’” Similarly, Betty said, “there are a lot of teachers that I have worked with in the past . . . We’ve built . . . really good relationships . . . that’s usually who I go to for resources.”

SETs also chose not to interact with some educators because of prior experiences. In some cases, prior experiences were negative. For example, Amelia said her administrators were “nonresponsive” to requests for more support, so “I’m not asking anymore.” Participants also said they avoided making too many demands on those who had been helpful in the past. For example, Eve said, “If we ask the sped director [for materials] she probably would [say yes].” However, she was concerned about burning goodwill by asking too often: “We don’t want to keep asking.” Thus, she spent personal money on smaller expenses. Interactions with the director were positive, but Eve stated a preference not to have to ask for needed resources: “It would be nice if we had . . . a set amount of money and then [could] choose what . . . to spend it on.”

*External strategies to promote alignment.* Participants employed external strategies, attempting to improve alignment by changing others’ behavior. These strategies included educating others and advocating for programs’ needs.

*Educating others.* SETs described educating others to improve perceptions of and interactions with students. Betty described providing PD: “We were able to take over some staff meetings, we had . . . voluntary trainings.” She said trainings addressed

An overview of our program . . . strategies we use . . . the kinds of students that we would get . . . difficulties they may have . . . how those behaviors are . . . manifestations of a lot of those difficulties . . . Because . . . these difficult and challenging behaviors . . . comes off [to others] as . . . rude and disrespectful . . . It’s helping other people to realize [that] “It’s not about you . . . [The students are] having a really hard time and they’re asking for help in their own way, and we’re just here to help them to figure out how to do it in a more appropriate way.”

As in this example, these efforts were sometimes focused, generally, on understanding their programs, EBD, and effective approaches to addressing student needs. Other times, training focused on individual students. Eve said that she and the school counselor created a packet describing each student’s challenges and needs “like, ‘This is what you’ll see, this is what you’ll do, this is what the student can do.’” Similarly, Greta described responding to general

educators' concerns about behavior: "I always tell them to get to know . . . the areas that [students] have strengths in," as she felt this helped teachers be more "accepting."

**Advocacy.** Participants also described advocating, strategically communicating with particular people, in particular ways, to try to persuade them to provide needed supports.

Fiona and Greta described using data to communicate their program's needs, especially to administrators. For example, Fiona described advocating with the district math specialist, using data to argue that the curriculum was too "language-based" for her students. Greta described using data to advocate for many changes. For example, she described "keep[ing] a notebook for every day of who missed lunches, how much time and how many times a kid required a certain amount of staff . . ." to advocate for more program staff. Greta also described being strategic about whom she communicated with, based on their priorities and the affordances of their position. For example, she explained how, in making student placement decisions, school and district administrators often disagreed because the director wanted to "save a lot of money" by keeping students in district, whereas "the principal's point of view is 'Ok, this kid is taking up all my staff, I'm [having] to repair things constantly.'" Greta felt strongly about keeping students in district, so she used this difference of opinion to try to keep students in the program. She said, "The director is . . . like, 'Oh, let's go with [Greta].'"

Other times, participants described persistently stating student needs, insisting they be addressed. For example, Eve described repeatedly communicating with a general educator:

[Teachers] don't want [students] to miss anything . . . We're trying to say . . . "This student needs this half hour in the morning for his meds to kick in, for him to do a routine, for him to move. If he doesn't do this, you're not going to have a good day . . . so you need to give us this half hour" . . . They say, "Oh, well how about 20 minutes?" "No, 30 minutes."

Amelia similarly described regularly repeating her perspective to administrators, regarding the program's needs: "I just think that the structure . . . of the program needs to be a little more defined . . . I keep asking" administrators to help define it more clearly.

Eve also described validating others' concerns, even when she disagreed. For example, she described how, when a paraprofessional disagreed about how to support a student, "I said, 'I understand what you're saying . . . You're working so hard . . . these kids are really complicated.'" She then explained to him why she felt her approach made sense despite his concerns.

**Internal strategies to adjust to misalignment.** Participants also employed internal strategies, to meet student needs as best

they could in spite of misalignment. Internal strategies included reframing their thoughts, adapting their programs, compromising with others, and, in one case, leaving the job.

**Reframing.** Sometimes participants reframed misalignment in a more positive light. For example, Fiona and Greta described how general education colleagues filed a grievance to have their class removed from their school the prior year; their room had been centrally located and other teachers felt their students' behaviors were disruptive. Fiona said she "felt like, 'Oh, how could we have done it better . . . to make it [so] . . . we weren't disruptive to everyone in the building?'" However, she reframed this, saying, "We tried not to take it personally," and she explained how the grievance helped them to obtain a more appropriate space. Eve similarly reframed misalignment, when she needed to pull students out of class for services and the general educator did not want them to leave. Eve said this challenged her efforts to serve the student, but reframed: "I see that as [the general educator] wanting to . . . take responsibility."

**Adjusting the program.** When they were misaligned regarding resources, SETs said they made changes to the program to meet student needs without needed resources. For example, Greta described adapting protocols to accommodate for a poorly constructed safe space. This included increasing the number of staff monitoring a student, which she considered "not a good utilization of staff," but crucial for safety, given constraints. Fiona described how they adjusted internally when administrators added a new student without paraprofessional support:

We certainly do our best as a team to find how we can make this transition most successful for our new student without disrupting others, but when we're not properly staffed . . . myself and my co-teacher a lot of times give up lunches, preps so we can . . . support students.

**Accommodating.** SETs also described accommodating others' perspectives. For example, Betty wanted a stronger emphasis on social-emotional learning, but said that, in later grades, teachers' focus was on being "ready for middle school . . . academic instruction, and less about those social skills." She thus adjusted interactions with upper grades teachers:

I focus less on . . . social skills . . . it is more . . . like, "How are we gonna fit minutes in?" or "How will this student get on track . . .?" It becomes less about . . . the challenges . . . interacting with each other and more about their challenges . . . meeting the academic goals.

**Leaving.** In one case, a SET, Amelia, described how, after a conflict with the principal and after repeated unsuccessful efforts to get more support, she gave up. She described how she thought to herself, "I'm quitting. I'm

going in on Monday, and I'm going to give my notice and say, 'I'm not coming back next year.'" She said she felt conflicted because "I like the kids, I like what I do." However, she did not come back the following year.

*Factors affecting strategies used to promote alignment.* The strategies SETs employed to improve alignment depended on several considerations. First, SETs described how time and resources constrained opportunities to use external strategies to promote alignment. For example, Betty explained how her caseload limited time to educate others: "I had a lot more time last year. I've had way less . . . outreach this year, mostly because of the amount of students that we have." Betty felt outreach had helped improve alignment, but a larger caseload limited time for this strategy. Eve described wanting to proactively communicate with others, but, because of limited time, she relied on colleagues to tell her about problems: "So I . . . tell them to communicate to me . . . 'Well, you gotta tell me cause if I don't know, I can't do anything. If I hear nothing from you, I'm thinking it's great.'" Insufficient time to work with colleagues to improve alignment was a common concern.

Fiona and Greta focused on strategies they found more effective. For example, Greta described the importance of collecting data to advocate, saying, "If you don't have the data, you don't have a leg to stand on." At the same time, Greta also described avoiding a strategy—filing a grievance—she saw as too extreme: "I'll just keep sending an email . . . 'cause I don't really know what else I can do . . . I don't want to file a grievance." Fiona and Greta also tended to use internal and external strategies at the same time, both advocating for change and adapting internally to the current situation, as Fiona explained in this situation, when they were understaffed:

We reach out . . . sharing our concerns . . . and as a team . . . myself and my co-teacher a lot of times give up lunches, preps . . . so we can . . . support these students.

## Synthesis

As shown in Figure 1, we found SETs shared responsibility for serving students with EBD with many other educators and thus their efforts to meet student needs were deeply interdependent with others, necessitating regular interactions. They interpreted interactions through the lens of their own understanding of (a) student needs, (b) the division of responsibilities for meeting student needs, and (c) the resources necessary to meet student needs. They experienced these interactions on a continuum, from perceived alignment to misalignment regarding student needs, the division of responsibilities, and resources. When they felt aligned with others, they felt they could depend on others and meet student needs; when they felt misaligned with

others, they felt challenged in their efforts to meet student needs. When they perceived misalignment, they used their interactions with others to try to promote alignment. We use a specific example, from Fiona, to illustrate this model. Fiona said,

We had a student last year who was very aggressive . . . We weren't very comfortable with him being in [the general education classroom] because he could go from 0 to 10 very . . . quickly so we had put in place with him and . . . with his parents and with the team, a progression of how he would go enter back in into the inclusion. But for the inclusion teacher, that was hard for her to see, because while he was in there, he was successful, so she didn't really see what was happening in here and why we were making those decisions . . . We were keeping [him here] while he was struggling . . . She saw him in a good place but really there was a lot of times when he wasn't [in a good place] and there was a good couple of months where he was not safe to enter in her classroom, and I think that was a challenge for her to accept and then it became difficult for me to do my job with the education piece because we wanted to mimic almost identical to . . . everything he was missing within the classroom but . . . sometimes that teacher would not provide the materials needed or . . . talk to me about the lessons that were missed and how we could go about making him successful—because we wanted it to be a smooth transition when he was back in, we didn't want him to spend 2 months in here missing math . . . and all of the sudden go in there and he's missing all of those basic skills . . . Which is part of the reason why we did retain that student and he's repeating kindergarten the second time. He's much more successful this year . . . We transitioned to a different kindergarten teacher. A fresh start we thought was best for him. We see [his original teacher] now and I think she's slowly [starting] to make that connection. I think it's *hard*. A lot of people don't see what's happening behind the scenes . . . when you have a student who does require safety [measures] put into place . . . we just have to continue with the collaboration.

In this case, Fiona was *interdependent* (the core theme) with a general educator. Based on their *conceptions of the student's needs*, the team decided to often keep the student in the self-contained class for safety, but the general educator did not concur with their understanding of the student's needs, such that Fiona felt their *conceptions of student needs* were *misaligned*. This led to further *misalignment* regarding both *resources* and the *division of responsibilities*; Fiona depended on the general educator to provide resources to support him in learning general education content, even when he could not physically go to class, whereas the general educator declined to fulfill this responsibility. This created *challenges to meeting student needs*, which, Fiona felt, resulted in him missing academic content and being retained. This experience, in turn, influenced later interactions, as she and Greta chose to place the student with a different teacher the next year while employing collaboration as a strategy to *promote alignment* in future.

## Discussion

Whereas SETs in traditional self-contained programs have reported substantial isolation from other educators (Bettini et al., 2019), the increasing placement in general education of the students in our study made the participants interdependent with other educators; their roles involved coordinating the work of general educators, paraprofessionals, partners, and administrators. As schools increasingly place students with EBD in general education settings, our findings suggest leaders may need to be aware of what these changes mean for SETs' work. Our participants felt their interdependent efforts to meet student needs were facilitated when others shared their perspectives on student needs, the division of responsibilities, and resources, and they felt challenged to meet student needs when others did not share their perspectives.

Consistent with prior research (e.g., Klingner & Vaughn, 2002; Pratt, 2014), coordination of SETs' efforts to support students with EBD in general education settings may depend on shared understandings among educators. The egg crate model allowed individual teachers to autonomously enact their own understandings of how to effectively serve students (Lortie, 1975), but coordinating student placement in general education settings may require teachers to hold shared conceptions. This aligns with results of case studies of effective inclusive schools, which show a shared vision (e.g., McLeskey et al., 2014) can provide a foundation for all educators to direct their efforts toward shared aims and make well-coordinated decisions about when, where, and how to meaningfully include students in general education settings (Billingsley et al., 2017).

This also raises questions about existing and potential mechanisms by which shared understandings are developed: What structures (e.g., preparation, PD) are currently developing shared understandings about how to serve students with EBD, and are these adequate? Our participants did not feel their schools had systemic means for developing shared understandings about how to serve their students. Thus, they described taking on this responsibility, educating others, and advocating to bring others into alignment with their perspectives. These results align with Bettini et al.'s (2019) findings that SETs are "not passive victims of challenging conditions, but rather active agents" (p. 189) in improving the conditions in which they work. Furthermore, these findings elaborate circumstances under which they tried to develop shared understandings, their motivations for doing so, and the strategies they adopted.

In a systematic review of research on teacher agency for inclusive education, Li and Rupp (2021) conceptualized teacher agency as a process of engagement with one's social context, characterized by (a) assessing the situation; (b) projecting what could be, by envisioning an alternative,

better situation; and (c) iteratively learning from experience and integrating that experience into one's engagement with one's social context, to move toward a better situation. Consistent with this, SETs described navigating interpersonal interactions by proactively engaging with their school's social context; they identified areas of misalignment (i.e., assessing the situation), identified potential improvements (i.e., projecting what could be), and used prior experiences to make strategic decisions about how to build alignment (i.e., iteratively learning). Some SETs reported experiencing some success, suggesting this process may yield dividends.

However, SETs should not be engaged in this kind of advocacy on their own. Reliance on individual teachers as a mechanism for promoting shared understanding of student needs places a systemic issue onto the shoulders of individuals who have limited power in broader educational systems. Indeed, our participants shared many examples of how their efforts to bring others into alignment with them sometimes failed, with negative results for students.

SETs' capacity to develop this kind of school-wide alignment may be limited by several factors. SETs serving students with EBD are, on average, less experienced and qualified, more likely to be uncertified, and more likely to leave in a given year than other SETs (Billingsley et al., 2006; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Thus, it is questionable both (a) whether beginning and/or unqualified SETs would have the sophisticated knowledge of effective practices for students with EBD to engage in the kinds of advocacy that, for example, Greta described engaging in, and (b) whether other educators would trust unqualified, inexperienced SETs enough to respond to that advocacy. Moreover, SETs are often the only person in their school who serve students with a particular disability; as such, they may be the lone voice in their school advocating for particular kinds of supports. In other words, it seems unreasonable to expect individuals with limited structural power in school systems to engage in this work alone, and this approach to cultivating shared understandings seems likely to have a high rate of failure if it is not accompanied by other efforts (e.g., district- or school-level efforts to cultivate shared understandings).

Furthermore, participants described how constraints (e.g., time, principals' responsiveness) limited their ability to use external strategies to improve alignment. SETs serving students with EBD often report having little time to plan and interact with others (O'Brien et al., 2019); these constraints may limit opportunities to educate others and advocate. This suggests SETs in the most challenging contexts—contexts that would likely benefit most from improved alignment—may have the least capacity to promote alignment. This is consistent with a large and robust body of organizational behavior research; a meta-analysis of 66 studies of employees in a range of professions found those who experienced the most stressors (e.g., strained

relationships with supervisors, lack of organizational support) were significantly less likely to express “change oriented ideas and suggestions” to supervisors and colleagues (Ng & Feldman, 2012, p. 216). This also aligns with Li and Ruppap’s (2021) conception of teacher agency, which highlights how environments constrain the forms and outcomes of teachers’ agency.

### Limitations

This study is intended to generate theory, and not to generalize; results cannot be applied to other SETs, given the small purposive sample. All participants taught in elementary settings the same state; other policy contexts or grade levels could yield different findings. Furthermore, the four programs in this analysis all served predominantly White and affluent students, whereas the two programs in the larger study that we excluded from this analysis, because they did not focus on increasing general education placements, served predominantly students of color and students of low socioeconomic status. This is consistent with national trends, as rates of general education placement are often higher in schools serving more socioculturally privileged students (Green et al., 2020). It is nonetheless a major limitation, as our findings cannot illuminate how SETs experience and respond to interpersonal interactions in programs serving students from socioculturally minoritized backgrounds. Furthermore, we did not ask SETs about how their sociocultural identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender) affected interactions with others. Prior research indicates teachers from minoritized backgrounds are highly conscious of how their identities shape interactions (e.g., Woodson & Pabon, 2016). This was not the focus of our research, but our study is limited by inattention to how sociocultural identities may relate to SETs’ experiences of interactions.

Our focus on SETs’ subjective experiences provided important insights into their experiences, and highlights a perspective often absent from research on SETs serving students with EBD (Bettini et al., 2017). However, results are subject to the limitations of self-report.

Finally, although participants shared many common experiences, Fiona, Greta, Betty, and Eve described using a wider range of strategies to promote alignment than did Amelia. Our small sample does not allow us to draw conclusions about why this is. Consistent with organizational behavioral research (Ng & Feldman, 2012), it is possible their administrators were more receptive and that they had more resources with which to advocate for alignment, providing them more reinforcement and support for advocacy than Amelia had. Because Amelia did not have a partner, as other SETs did, she may not have had as much time to advocate, or she may have had less reason to anticipate success, given prior experiences. Amelia was also in her first year at her school, and she was the only SET in her program,

potentially limiting social capital to advocate. However, it is also possible other SETs were more resourceful and tenacious.

### Implications for Future Research

Because our results are not generalizable, further research is needed to determine whether these SETs’ experiences are common among SETs teaching students with EBD, and the extent to which interdependence relates to their students’ movement into general education settings. Survey research (e.g., O’Brien et al., 2019) could be useful for these purposes, allowing scholars to examine associations between student placement and SETs’ interdependence with colleagues.

Results suggest alignment may be important to consider in future research and practice, especially when students are moving into general education settings. Future research should examine whether alignment may be associated with the extent to which SETs can promote student success in general education settings. For example, when SETs perceive alignment with colleagues, do their students have better experiences and outcomes in general education settings? How does alignment contribute to more equitable inclusive experiences for students with EBD?

Future research exploring the strategies SETs use to improve the coordination of efforts to serve their students in general education could also have practical implications for (a) teacher preparation, as SETs could be taught to engage in more productive strategies, and (b) leaders, who could provide avenues for SETs to engage in these strategies (Li & Ruppap, 2021). However, these potential practical implications depend upon a more robust body of research examining why and how SETs advocate, what advocacy strategies are more or less productive in different contexts, and what factors lead SETs to adopt more or less productive approaches. Thus, we recommend that scholars take up a focused line of research, examining how SETs advocate for conditions that support them to meet student needs. This research could draw on a robust body of research from organizational behavior, examining employee voice behaviors in other professions (Ng & Feldman, 2012), as well as emerging scholarship on teacher agency for inclusive education (Li & Ruppap, 2021).

Results also have implications for research on improving services for students with EBD. Scholars often recommend providing SETs PD, and researchers have tested PD strategies for SETs serving students with EBD (e.g., Ginns & Begeny, 2019). Because SETs rely on others to enact effective practices, there is also a need to understand whether providing PD to a broader audience might be more effective than PD to SETs alone, and whether PD may be more effective when offered with improved support for coordination with others.

## Implications for Practice

Our results indicate that increasing general education placements for students with EBD may increase SETs' interdependence with other educators' work. Thus, as leaders consider increasing placement in general education, they should be mindful of what this means for SETs' roles, and the kinds of supports SETs may require to navigate interdependence with other educators. We specifically recommend that leaders consider systemic strategies to foster shared understandings of students' needs, the division of responsibilities, and the resources needed.

Principals play a key role in cultivating a culture of serving all students (Billingsley et al., 2017), but often feel unprepared for this responsibility (e.g., Stelitano et al., 2020). Thus, we recommend they work closely with district special education administrators, who are likely to have deeper knowledge of students with EBD, to consider and improve the strategies they are currently using to foster shared understandings of how to serve students with EBD. Furthermore, SETs were invested in advocating and educating others about their students; thus, we encourage administrators to think of these SETs as resources in making decisions. Our participants reported limited time was often a constraint impeding their capacity to foster alignment; we thus recommend administrators consider ensuring SETs have time to navigate interpersonal interactions, by (a) limiting extra demands on them, (b) protecting their planning time by providing strong supervision so behavioral crises do not interrupt planning, and (c) providing dedicated time to work with colleagues and paraprofessionals. School administrators may consider regularly discussing these issues with SETs, monitoring challenges SETs experience so they can develop and enact systemic solutions.

We also encourage SETs to reflect on challenges they are experiencing, and consider whether it might be useful to employ strategies these SETs used. Our participants' descriptions of their efforts demonstrate some strategies (e.g., collecting data) that may be useful for prompting other educators to more effectively facilitate their efforts to meet student needs.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available on the *Remedial and Special Education* website with the online version of this article.

## Notes

1. Participants requested that we omit some information from these descriptions to protect their confidentiality. We do not provide precise information about their years of experience, and we do not report how many students they served (all participants served three to seven students). We have also changed one detail to protect a participant's identity; three programs had a school counselor who worked in the program part- or full-time, whereas the fourth program had a social worker who filled a similar role. This special educator expressed concern that, if her administrators read the results, they would be able to identify her by this detail, so she requested that we refer to the social worker as a school counselor. This does not change the substance of our findings in any way.
2. DRO stands for Differential Reinforcement of Other Behavior.

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