"When We Talk About Compliance, It's Because We Lived It" Online Educators' Roles in Supporting Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

As participation in online learning grows, so do concerns around the ways in which students with disabilities are served in virtual school programs, both full and part-time. At the crux of this struggle is the way in which federal and state laws (many of which were incepted before online learning existed or gained traction as an educational option) are interpreted by educators and translated into policies at the school level. Further, administrators, special education case managers, and teachers all interpret school level policies and answer to directives from a hierarchy of supervisors. The interpretations of these policies and the understandings educators use to guide their thinking have not been well-researched. In the present study, teachers, special education case managers, school level special education administrators, and regional directors were interviewed about their roles in developing, supporting, and implementing accommodations and other forms of support for students with disabilities in online courses. Findings from this work focus on the role conceptions of various types of educators in virtual schools and the tensions they experience as they work to support each other in positioning students with disabilities for success.

Introduction

For K-12 students with disabilities (SWD), there has been a marked shift from participation in school programs towards accountability for learning (Kaufman & Blewett, 2012; Zirkel, 2013). An emphasis on accountability has introduced terms such as *data-driven decision-making* (Mandinach, 2012) and *mastery learning* (Gillespie & Graham, 2014) into the school reform lexicon with particular implications for SWD. One implication is the need for SWD to be held to the same academic standards as

their peers without disabilities while also ensuring SWD have legally protected means of demonstrating subject mastery using modifications, accommodations, and other types of support (IDEA, 1997; IDEIA, 2004). Most support mechanisms pre-date online learning (receiving instruction partially or completely through synchronous or asynchronous interactions over the Internet) as a possibility in K-12 education. However, as more states mandate online learning for graduation, and as online schools increase in number, there are many questions about how accommodations for SWD are implemented (see Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2013). One question is how educators (at various levels) in online schools describe their roles and responsibilities in ensuring that disability service plans are implemented.

In the present study, teachers, special education case managers, school level special education administrators, and regional directors were interviewed about their roles in developing, supporting, and implementing accommodations and other forms of support for SWDs in online courses.

Providing Services to SWD

Accommodations, modifications, and other services to SWD are legally protected when included in a highly structured Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a more flexible plan created under Section 504 of the Disabilities Rehabilitation Act of 1973. According to the federal Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (1997), an IEP is:

> [A] statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals designed to meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum; and meet each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disabilities. (Sections 300.320(a)(2)(i)(A) and (B))

A team consisting of a child's teachers, parents or guardians, local school educational authorities, relevant central office personnel, and related service providers (e.g., speech therapists) create the IEP. A representative of the Local Educational Authority (LEA) attests that the stipulated support fits within the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act's (IDEA) parameters. In addition, students are guaranteed a "free and appropriate public education" by public law 94-142 (1975), which was designed to give states and local schools guidelines and support that would ensure SWDs were able to attend school, be appropriately educated, and stipulates parental rights to advocate. Plans made under Section 504 outline support and accommodations for exceptionalities that fall outside of IDEA's guidelines. Developing these plans is not the responsibility of special education departments, but instead falls to parents, administrators and other legally relevant parties. Section 504 is part of general anti-discrimination laws that apply to all students, regardless of disability status.

Educators often have a weak understanding of how to incorporate students' actual needs as they create IEPs and plans under Section 504 (Mellard, Deshler, & Barth, 2004; Crawford & Ketterlin-Geller, 2013; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; Ketterlin-Geller, Alonzo, Braun-Monegan, & Tindall, 2007). In addition, there is minimal research on how educators view their responsibilities for implementing IEPs and 504 plans in various educational settings. This lacuna is prevalent in online educational settings where students do not regularly visit a physical institution to receive educational or other disability-related services. While McLeskey (2011) identified a high level of need for professional development regarding the creation and implementation of disability service plans, he did not address what participating teachers viewed as their roles in the process, how supervisors and administrators implicitly or explicitly shaped those roles, and there was no mention of how other educators who do not participate in the plan development work to the implement plans.

Concerns about educators' interconnected roles and responsibilities are especially pressing in K-12 online educational leadership arenas. When LaFrance and Beck (2014) reviewed administrative

preparation programs they found that very few provide administrator preparation for leading a K-12 online school, or for supporting online teachers and thus, most leadership "training" in online school contexts is gained "on the job" and through experience. In addition, several studies have documented a lack of awareness regarding the proliferation and popularity of K-12 online learning, the ways in which educators and the general public misconceive online and distance learning, substantial variability in quality, and ineffective or non-existent evaluation/accountability for student learning (Compton, Davis, & Mackey, 2009; Davis & Rose, 2007; Glass & Welner, 2011). These concerns about online learning are rooted in responsible and responsive virtual/online school leadership and not limited to teachers. These previously unconsidered questions of roles, responsibilities, and relationships in virtual/online schools urged and drove this research.

Role Construction in Professional and Educational Settings

The history of American schools is often linked to and characterized by local control. Often, this has resulted in considerable social and political tension (Apple, 2004). In his classic sociological look at teaching, Waller (1932) famously noted that schools strive for autocracy (i.e., isolation and self-governance) because they are under threat of criticism and sanction, and that they are under threat of criticism and sanction because they strive for autocracy. The tension, and even strain, that develops as a result of the need for schools to protect themselves from outside criticism falls to all educators within a given school, according to Waller. Although Waller's work is over 80 years old, there has been renewed interest in how his ideas relate to current reforms in education (Pajak, 2012).

Waller's (1932) view of schools has implications for how individuals in schools attend to their roles in institutions because his work suggests that strain on an organization causes uncertainty that will lead to particular kinds of responses from individuals. Jackson (1968) observed that people know when they are in the presence of an institution—all of their senses tell them so. Schools, in whatever incarnation, are likely to have a certain look and feel to them that gives them stability over time, but this also means that substantial and enduring change is difficult to accomplish. While online learning environments have fewer physical edifices, it is interesting to consider what aspects of school under these circumstances might transcend space and time to appear and reappear in various online schools.

It is under these conditions that individuals in online/virtual schools are striving to engage in the information gathering processes necessary to perform their roles. Goffman (1959) conducted work in identity that has been applied in highly technological environments because he emphasized technology as a shaping force in communication, which in turn, enables various roles to emerge (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). When individuals gather information about each other face-to-face or through technological media, they need to define the present social situation so that they can infer expected behavior. Sources of information are *sign vehicles* that allow individuals to *give* and *give off* impressions about themselves (Goffman, pg. 136). These sign vehicles take shape through what people do, what they say, how they say it, where they are when they say it, or vice versa by not saying or doing anything.

The process of information gathering for the purpose of knowing how to behave with others is crucial in professional settings where individuals must interact, including collaborating to serve SWD. The cycles of signal giving and receiving culminate in a *modus vivendi* (Goffman, 1959) or pattern of consensus for behavior in a setting. Goffman offers insight into how online educators might conceptualize their own roles in relationship to SWD, as the sign vehicles of technology influence the messages that form the pattern of consensus in their schools. Thus, educators who are intimately connected with the disability service plans not only determine what support will be given to SWD and what accommodations will be made, they also have the potential to dictate how that support becomes (or does not become) part of the *modus vivendi* at the schools.

Goffman's (1959) theories suggest that roles will be developed as educators interact with one another, even though the students in online schools may not physically meet. These interactions are not only limited to online schools, but also involve the brick-and-mortar schools which perform any number of functions, such as drafting the original IEP or 504 documents, providing certain services or therapies, maintaining student records for state reporting, and counseling the students regarding online course enrollment. Thus, a complex web of relationships emerges as SWD enroll, attend, and complete or fail online coursework.

Methods and Strategies

The participants in this study were 26 employees at online schools from 27 states. Six were male and 20 were female. Some employees worked in the same schools in the same states, while others were multi-school directors representing multiple states. These participants were identified through contacts with administrators responsible for overseeing research projects at large public online schools, through relationships with online learning vendors, and through charter school networks which provided the names of potential employee participants. Referred employees were contacted to verify their interest in participating and, if so, interview appointments were set up. This referral method ensured participants would be geographically diverse and representative of a variety of program types. These types included fully online full-time state sponsored programs, fully online part-time state sponsored programs, fully online and blended charter schools that were nationally networked, and fully online and blended charter schools that were independently operated.

Description of Participating Educators

In accordance with agreements made with participating educators and their employers, no biographical information about individual educators will be provided. However, all participants had more than three total years in education, all reported having the correct level of credential and certification necessary for their job titles (where applicable), and all had previously worked for varying lengths of time in brick-and-mortar schools. In addition, each participant was directly in charge of providing special education services. Educators identified themselves as teachers, local special education (SE) professionals, single school special education administrators, or multi-school/multistate special education administrators. Table 1 contains more information about educator job types.

Table 1 *Numbers of participant job types*

Job Type	Number of Participants
Teachers	4
Local SE Professionals	7
School SE Directors	8
Multi-school/Multistate SE Directors	7

Educators reported varying organizational structures and state policies about online learning that affected their work. Some worked in schools that were their own LEA while others were part of a brick-and-mortar school or district. In addition, some educators worked in states where online learning courses were required for high school graduation. Finally, some of the participants worked in states where online learning was widely available and there were many potential vendors of online learning curricula and/or school services, while others worked in states where online learning for K-12 students was fairly new and there were few policies regarding it. As we sought out educators for this study and worked with various programs, networks, and companies, we realized that it was in the best interest of online learning entities to share names of employees believed to be competent, even exemplary. However, this does not mean that the participants—even as a group—represented all online educators or that their perspectives were definitive. What we did attempt to do was capture a portion of the personal practical knowledge (Shaefer, Downey, & Clandinin, 2014) of educators in as many diverse settings as would agree to provide access to participants.

Data Collection

The major form of data collection in this study was semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview is designed to obtain objective responses from participants about their perceptions and/or experiences with phenomena. In order to use this strategy it was assumed that the educators at online schools had sufficient knowledge of and/or experience with the phenomenon under study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In this study, that phenomenon was providing accommodation, services, and support to SWD in online coursework as well as the numerous high stakes tests that they are charged to take.

Teachers and local SE professionals were interviewed between 1 and 8 times, depending on their consent and availability. These interviews lasted between 15 to 45 minutes. The school and multi-school/multistate SE directors were only interviewed once, but their interviews typically lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Interviews varied in length because teachers in the online settings in this study were contractually obligated to be available to answer phone calls and attend to students immediately during their workday, whereas the administrators, managers, and directors in this study were not operating under such expectations.

A schedule or guide was used during the interview to provide a basis for comparison with other participants. The guide was developed using the extant research base (Bryman, 2012). In this study, the research base focused on supporting SWD. One additional consideration for interview questions came from Seidman's (2012) work, where he suggests interviews begin by exploring how participants came into the phenomenon. This format allowed educators to narrate their journey into education and specifically online learning and their present jobs. A final consideration shaping the protocol came from negotiations with the administrators in charge of research at the schools or who work directly for companies that helped us identify educators for the study. Negotiations came as iterations of protocol submission drafts, feedback, redrafting, and resubmission to the vendors. Table 2 (next page) lists main topics and the general order they appeared on the semi-structured interview schedule.

Educators answered questions, modified questions as they responded, and encouraged researchers to ask follow-up questions. In addition educators were encouraged to share stories, give examples from specific schools, and cite recent instances in their answers. Doing so leveraged the flexibility of the semi-structured interview (Bartholomew, Henderson, & Marcia, 2000). Additional flexibility occurred by using an orientation from Fontana and Frey (2005), where interviewing researchers listened with a sympathetic ear to the participants, taking a favorable ethical stance. In other words, researchers assumed that educators were capable employees, that they cared about SWD, and that ideas and experiences while working to provide support to this population had benevolent intentions.

***Table 2** Semi-structured interview schedule of topics and typical questions*

Experience in Education -How long have you been in education? -What schools/grades/subjects have you taught? -How did you come to your current position in this virtual school?
Experience with Accommodations -What accommodations have you overseen for students recently? -Were these typical? If not, how were they not? If so, how were they?
Participation in the IEP/504 process -In what ways do you participate in the creation of the IEP/504 process? -In what ways do you implement or interpret those documents?
Professional Development -What professional development activities do you participate in or oversee regarding students with disabilities?
Engagement with Colleagues and other Stakeholders -How do you work with other in your school, the schools of record, the learning coach, the parents, or the other entities to provide accommodations or other support to students with disabilities?
Technology -How does technology mediate your work? -What sorts of technology would help you mediate your work?
For the Multi-School Leaders/Directors -How do you perceive the preparedness of teachers and other employees to carry out IEP/504 accommodations and provide support to students with disabilities?

Data Analysis

A total of 62 interviews were conducted. Three interviews were not transcribed due to unintelligible audio resulting from technical difficulties. After interviews were transcribed, educators were presented transcripts to verify their accuracy before the coding processes began.

Saldaña (2012) refers to two types of coding: *lumping* and *splitting*. In lumping, long speeches of several sentences or more from interviews are taken holistically and assigned a broad code. By contrast, splitting occurs when data is grouped into segments consisting of a sentence or smaller. Lumping is concerned with finding the essence of a phenomenon; splitting encourages more careful scrutiny. Two researchers coded these interviews. They employed a first cycle or (first order) coding process where speeches were split into constituent parts and then lumped into more general codes. The first order coding type was *dramaturgical* (Berg, 2001; Feldman, 1995). In dramaturgical coding, researchers explore interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences and actions. In this study, particular attention was paid to educators as "social actors" (Lindoff & Taylor, 2005, p. 201) where educators engaged in strategies to meet challenges. During this inter/intra personal work, emotions and attitudes were also worthy of attention and taken into account during the coding process.

Coders recorded their agreement percentage after each meeting. Average agreement was 82 percent for split codes and 93 percent for lumped codes. Lumped codes were regrouped and reconstituted as second order themes in another round of meetings (Van Manen, 1990). The purpose of the second round of meetings was to consider interrelationships among the data from participants with different job titles and to look across the interviews as a whole data set. This level of coding was necessary to help guard against the risk that a theme could emerge because of a match between terminology or keywords and topics instead of true saliency to research purposes. The analytical process revealed patterns for teachers, SE professionals, and school-level directors that are based on overlapping roles they have in working with SWD. Findings are presented with evidence in the form of quotations that represent the consensus of the educators who were interviewed.

Findings from the Interviews

During data analysis interactional patterns between students, teachers, local SE professionals, and single/multischool administrators emerged. The teachers mostly interacted with students, and to a lesser extent, parents. The local SE professionals interacted with students at times, but mainly with parents. They also interacted with related service providers and brick and mortar schools of record when required. The administrators who were only in charge of one online school also interacted with related service providers and schools of record. Their interactions with students and parents were minimal and usually linked to facilitating communication with these other two entities. Administrators also reported to school executives or higher administrators, which sometimes were representatives of curriculum vendors or members of a governing body such as a school board. Any administrator could monitor or evaluate a teacher. Local SE professionals were often involved with the process of hiring and mentoring teachers who will work with SWD. None of the teachers evaluated their colleagues.

For teachers and the local SE professionals, their roles were bound tightly to relationship building responsibilities. They described their work in patterns of primary roles, accompanying concerns, and reconciliation strategies for meeting responsibilities to students and parents. The data obtained for these two groups are presented in this frame. However, for school and multischool directors, themes are presented as a series of tensions that overlap with the roles of the teachers and local SE professionals.

Teachers

Teachers in this study articulated roles around three major ideas: 1) ensuring course completion through extensive monitoring, 2) conveying curriculum to students, and 3) building and maintaining relationships with students and parents. Major concerns around these roles were identifying and assisting student non-workers, making inaccessible curriculum materials accessible, and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders.

Non-working students. Teachers described non-workers as students that did not complete assignments or engage with course materials for a period of time usually lasting around two weeks. Teachers were required to contact students when they were deemed to be non-working by some sort of system trigger in the management software system. Contact, or attempted contact with non-workers could take as little as one hour or more than 3 to 4 hours of a teacher's working day. As one teacher describes—even laments—attending to non-workers can be difficult: "I am chasing them to answer the phone and various things. So calling, calling, calling without a response, and then emailing and texting and whatever else." In order to avoid this "chasing," as several teachers described it, they engaged in proactive monitoring phone calls to students they knew would struggle to keep pace, made pacing guides with students and families, and enlisted the parents as co-monitors. Teachers were very eager to embrace parents as co-monitors in the curriculum, but ultimately desired for students to monitor themselves. This is reflected in a teacher's description below:

Another parent of a student with a disability just sent me an email today. She said that, "I was pleased that my son used his own initiative to go back to the videos and practice before taking the test. Usually it's me forcing him, maybe he's finally understanding that it actually saves him time if he does it right the first time. I'm trying to talk him into taking geometry next year online, even though he prefers to take classes in person, Mike just seems to do math better online because he has extra time to complete the course, resubmit assignments, and review videos over and over. Regular math classes on campus just don't allow him the opportunity to really learn the material.

The online teacher viewed this experience as a success because it resulted in the child doing work autonomously and the parent being in alignment with the teacher and the school. The role of the teacher as it emerged in this study was to help parents help students do work, which led to achievement and also positive attitudes about online learning.

Inaccessibility of curriculum. Teachers were concerned the curricula they received and were required to teach was inappropriate for many SWDs and they had a sense the tasks would not prepare students to perform well in high stakes testing. Here is how one teacher discussed the curriculum for SWDs:

I would just say that 9 out of 10—no, probably 10 out of 10 have extended time listed for assignments and tests. I'd say our students with disabilities that have final reports and things just need a little bit of extra time and not so much like extra time as in like extra weeks in the class, but extra time on the telephone to explain things a few times over or to let them process what can be difficult assignment tasks.

Teachers in this study indicated that students needed extra instructional time to account for the inaccessibility of the curriculum. Time was spent providing direct instruction, but not so much instruction about content related skills. Rather direct instruction was given on the course and how to access the course's content.

Other attempts to give feedback often focused on redirecting students to other online resources, many of which are emerging:

So within our feedback, if they really messed up on capitalization or punctuation, we have a link and, just to copy and paste; we can put in our feedback, "Hey, it looks like you're having trouble with your capitalization. Why don't you click here and watch this video on capitalization and try to go back and fix your mistakes?" So that's going to be so helpful, because getting them to actually go to that student help website on their own is hard, but when they have a link they can just click on and it goes straight to the video, I'm excited about that.

The description above is not about giving instruction about capitalization, but rather about directing the student to another resource online. Further, the video about capitalization was not differentiated (e.g. there was not a way to target instruction). When it comes to accessibility, the teachers in this study wanted to ensure students had enough access to technology to understand the task. In accordance with the concern for non-working students, the goal was to help the students become as independent as possible.

Relational breakdowns. Teachers were contractually obligated to have regular communication with parents. Generally, teachers reported receiving 20 or more calls per hour during certain points of the day or in the year. The busiest times often were tied to spring graduation. Constant calls to and from parents and students often focused on reminding non-workers to work and make sure students understood lesson requirements, to conduct periodic oral assessments, or take tests. Tests were embedded in the courses as unit exams, but there were also final exams for courses or tests required by states. Pressure to

take tests and perform well caused emotions to run high. However, teachers, students, and parents had heated interactions for other reasons, too, usually having to do with turning in work:

> It took this student one minute and 20 seconds to complete this practice test, even though mom said her daughter was working on it for hours. And I took a picture on my cell phone of the time log, and I sent it to mom. Well, then after mom yells and screams at me I ended up negotiating for the girl re-do the test.

Not all emotional supports teachers provided were related to the experiences students were having in online learning. Teachers were also told painful stories about students' lives including health problems as well as aspects of their socioeconomic circumstances, such as homelessness. Teachers were also made privy to students' negative experiences in other learning situation:

> And, she's like really behind and she won't be in 10th grade if she doesn't finish the segment and her grade went down tremendously and come to find out, she had a 5th grade math teacher that used to just make her cry.

Teachers reported these stories with concern and they reported taking these into account as they worked with students. In particular, they felt an obligation to protect students from further negative experiences in school. However, the bottom line was that students had to continue to work steadily, even in programs where teachers initially lauded online schooling as a way to break away from tight timelines endemic to traditional school.

Local SE Professionals

Local SE professionals in this study constructed their roles to leverage their knowledge of disability policy and their status of holding more responsibility than a teacher, but with less social distance than a regular administrator. These educators were teachers who had some administrative responsibilities, but were not considered administrators. Data from interviews with local SE professionals revealed themes of conflict mediation, course load counseling, and disability policy enforcement.

Conflict mediation. Local SE professionals described spending much of their time helping parents negotiate with teachers and with other school officials. Below, one local SE professional illustrates her mediating role:

> Sometimes I work with students. Like, today I have a conference call set up. I'm waiting for the teacher to tell me exactly the time, but I'll be meeting with the parent, the teacher and the student and myself in a conference call setting to work out issues of the student not working, and making sure that we're all on the same page and getting some buy-in from the student. But for the most part, right now, I don't necessarily work with students.

Local SE professionals support teachers in their roles as monitors of student progress and as teachers work to enlist parents as co-monitors. In the narrative above, the local SE professional offered her support towards her teacher, but these professionals also told stories of advocating for parents to work with teachers to arrange for student accommodations and elicit empathy for students' personal and/or family circumstances, and even advising teachers and colleagues about issues of special education law. One local SE administrator referred to these roles as managing "sticky situations":

> I will say that teachers do come to me on what we call the "sticky situations." It's a parent who is very angry or a teacher who just doesn't know what to do and they may not have the confidence in each other. So instilling confidence in them is something all of us have talked about; to know

that the information they're providing is accurate--that they just need to have the confidence to provide it. A lot of people get afraid when special education comes in because it is so sticky with laws. And we are under such an odd umbrella of what is written and what is not written for our online context. So most of our conversations, whether they take place using instant messaging, email, or on the phone, would be based upon a negative situation. And the teachers are looking for some guidance/approval of their manager that, "Is this the right?" or "Is this an okay answer?"

The mediation roles in these cases were not simply administrative cases of teachers, students, and parents not getting along. Local SE administrators played fundamental roles in shaping support for SWD that is both formal (through IEP documents and state policies) and informal through the daily decisions teachers make as they implement IEPs.

Calling local SE professionals essentially served as calling a hotline for information about laws and support for teachers' professional judgment. Local SE professionals, particularly when they were teachers in the same online schools as where they currently worked, were uniquely positioned as people who were listened to and respected for their expertise by teachers and families. Indeed they said that they wanted to help parents and teachers understand not just laws and policies, but how laws and policies apply to individual children in particular circumstances. Since laws and policies change and evolve rapidly, local SE professionals are on the front lines of keeping up with legislation and their schools' policy responses.

Course load counseling. Local SE professionals spent much of their time doing course load counseling for SWD, even though the online schools where they worked had guidance counselors. Course load counseling referred to: a) enrolling students in an online school by answering questions about the program; b) advising within an online school by making sure students have the necessary kind and number of courses for graduation; and c) recommending that students move out of online school entirely. The following narration is an example of how local SE professionals worked with students within the online school:

> This boy was trying to take a semester of four courses. I was concerned because his mother had no computer savvy. The son had never taken any online courses before. So taking four courses was going to be overwhelming. So I explained to the mother if they dropped two and postponed them, and he worked on two courses at an accelerated pace, he would be better off.

Decisions about course loads were based on the local SE professionals' experiences as online teachers and their experience mediating between teachers and parents where students have a difficult time keeping up with multiple courses. From the perspective of these local SE professionals, it was better for students with disabilities to take online classes one at a time and move faster rather than several classes together and move more slowly. Such a strategy was not the recommendation for all students, and of course, may not be the case for all online learning programs, but it was heavily promoted among the local SE professionals we interviewed regarding students with disabilities. They further explained that course counseling occurred in order to avoid having to counsel students out of their online schools entirely. Local SE professionals did not enjoy counseling parents against online learning, but they all said that they have counseled students out of their schools. One local SE professional explained this tension:

> I do also believe that the virtual setting is not for every student. I'm talking about students with disabilities because that's what these interviews are about, but really in general this is not for everybody. And no matter what the accommodations are, it's not a good fit for some kids. Now, on the other side of that, this is a godsend for many families; it just fits their bill.

Local SE professionals were ultimately looking for ways to keep students in online schools because they believe that taking courses online can be life changing for many families with children who have struggled in traditional settings. Nevertheless, there is a sense that some students would be better off in other educational settings (i.e., traditional settings). A critical part of the local SE professionals' role is to provide information to families making this decision.

Policy enforcement. Above all, local SE professionals constructed roles for themselves around policy enforcement. In fact, their roles as mediators and course load counselors were directly tied to policy enforcement. Local SE professionals explained that many laws and policies that are supposed to ensure that SWD receive an appropriate education do not attend to what happens as children transition into and out of online schools. One local SE professional referred to spaces of obsolescence as "funkiness":

> There is all this funkiness with where we fall in the language of the law with reference to brick and mortar schools; we had a student who was arrested for having a controlled substance. We had to have a meeting to determine whether his disability played part in that. I was able to attend those meetings. But, because I, as a virtual school provider, was not part of the team because we are not the LEA, I do not get to help make any determination. But I do have to worry about how that determination interacts with our policies.

Some online schools are their own LEA and some are not. Most local SE professionals in this study worked at schools where they were only able to participate at a very peripheral level in the creation of IEPs that they must implement. Many of the accommodations for example, were about preferential seating or bathroom breaks—things that do not apply directly to a student working from their home using the Internet to do their lessons. However, parents do not always understand the policy constraints some online schools face. As one SE professional told us:

> A mother wrote to me asking to please let me know what other paperwork would be needed to achieve an IEP plan for her son. And so I followed up with an email and said,
>
> "We're happy to provide accommodations, but you know, we don't implement IEPs—the school of record does." I think mom really has this in her mind that our school is the new school of record, but it's not.

Local SE professionals were constantly learning new information about disabilities, policies, and individual students; then they were responsible for dissemination. For example, parents of SWD and previous schools of record do not always disclose that children have disabilities or other relevant exceptionalities when they enroll in online courses. If the teachers in online schools are "chasing" students, the SE professionals are "chasing" information.

School-wide and Multi-school Program Administrators

School-wide and multi-school program administrators in our study constructed their roles as narrative tensions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The tensions metaphor is appropriate given the oversight to which they are subjected in most states. One administrator gave the following example of such surveillance:

> In our state we undergo triennially a self-review, a special education self-review, and we have to go through and audit our files according to what a state is looking for. There's a 34-page compliance file: a line item manual. And it varies depending on complaints we may have received, identified areas of needs of concern, and our training processes. But one of the things

my colleague and I had to tackle when we came to this position was that 11 of 14 schools simultaneously underwent a very intensive and verification review by the State Department of Education. And they came in and they basically took over our office. For a good week they were there in person, but for 6 months we were working hand-in-hand with them, pulling files and going through training and process and procedures and such. And we came out of that completely clear. So when we talk about compliance, it's because we lived it (Multischool administrator).

Under these circumstances of oversight it is unsurprising that tensions dominate the work of high-level online special education administrators. Tensions described to us included: a) the need to conceive of online teaching as being both distinct and similar to teaching in traditional settings; b) a strong desire to advocate for SWD while also pushing them out of online learning and out of special education; c) a deep rhetoric around compliance to the law with an accompanying wish that their schools could be excused from many regulations; and d) an acknowledgement of the role of the parent and or learning coach sitting next to students as paramount for success coupled with an insistence that Internet-based delivery models are superior to traditional ones. The following sections focus on each of these tensions.

Teaching online/offline. The school level and multi-state directors we interviewed had both teaching experiences and non-teaching experiences in schools (e.g. guidance counselor). Some were adamant that teaching in a traditional school tainted a teacher or that such experience made it difficult to transition into online teaching. However, most of the participants felt successful teaching in a traditional school and successful teaching in an online school required similar practices, even though teaching online required new knowledge bases. One administrator articulated this position quite definitively:

> The learning curve is pretty big depending on a teacher's experience in the brick and mortar classroom. It's really difficult to go from no teaching experience or just student teaching into the virtual setting because you have no frame of reference. How do you figure out how to do things online if you don't know how to do them face-to-face? (Single school administrator)

Indeed many of the teaching stories that we were told started out as compare/contrast illustrations between traditional and online schooling. These comparisons were uneasy since online schooling and traditional schooling options were regarded to be in competition, yet there was a sense that some kind of a universal or general way of teaching or instructing existed that would be helpful not only in both settings, but also for students with and without disabilities. Administrators also reported actively signaling to teachers that they should be looking for universal strategies while maintaining the personalization expected of online learning.

Advocacy and push out. One of the most striking tensions expressed by the administrators was the notion that online learning was a viable option for everyone, except for a small minority (e.g., SWD). As one administrator stated:

> I would say that the biggest group that has the most challenges would be your students with emotional disabilities, mainly because also those students need a highly structured environment and independence is expected when you're operating in a virtual world (Single school administrator).

Administrators in this study came from traditional settings where they worked with SWD and where some even had children of their own with disabilities. They were torn between their beliefs about inclusion and their practical knowledge about high attrition rates in online environments among SWD:

> In an online environment, there are certain students that it's just not the right academic environment for. And our special ed staff are encouraged to ask the right questions and have the

right meetings with parents to make sure that this is a good academic environment for that student, and the family is getting the best service that they can. Sometimes these meetings result in a recommendation that is "you know, this may not be the best place for you." But that's tricky because parents want choice and they want to do what they want to do; so sometimes it's a matter of not just counseling them out, but letting them know about the realities of being a learning coach for special ed student at home and what we can offer and maybe what we can't (Multi-school administrator).

This administrator's description of what happens when parents want a child in an online program who may not be suited for it from an administrative standpoint suggests that parental, social, and cultural resources are part of the decision as to whether to admit the child into online programs. The use of a word like "service" in this context also suggests a certain consumerism that goes both ways. The school is positioned as trying to provide an educational product, but performance improves when they can start with certain kinds of human capital. The example from this administrator also connects to special educators' advice to parents as informal, but well communicated administrative policy.

Regulation rhetoric. While educators in this study sought clarity on how to best educate SWD in online environments, they viewed their roles in compliance as being well defined. The individuals we interviewed placed high importance on monitoring student performance, tracking student pacing, and managing billing procedures, all of which maintain online schools' funding sources. These monitoring and tracking procedures are viewed as being important to accountability. As one administrator stated:

In our larger schools that are obviously more established and have more local staff, I do general oversight. In our smaller schools, and specifically our new schools, I'm very involved. In those situations, I play a much more active role in monitoring IEP compliance, and helping to make sure that we have met the requirements that we need to get all of our state and federal funding. It's a much more involved role, the less local staff there is. It's a question of expense (Single school administrator).

Compliancy emerged as the administrators work to maintain active roles in the schools for which they are responsible. Attending to duplicity—making sure that nothing is said in the meeting that is non-compliant—enables the administrators to accomplish the tasks necessary to qualify for continued funding. Being in compliance requires a hierarchy of supervision where information is duplicated at all levels. Another administrator described these procedures as a system of checks to ensure compliance with federal guidelines:

Special ed teachers have lead teachers and mentor teachers who coach and guide them if they have questions. I meet regularly with the lead teachers and guide and support them in directing their teachers. Teachers are asked to submit their IEPs to their lead teachers for a review check prior to the meeting. These are usually due 48 hours before the meetings, so that we can build capacity for ensuring compliance (Single school administrator).

Pre-submission of IEP documents is part of the transparency goal in a school, leading to accountability. As administrators engage in accountability they are able to provide signals to teachers about their own identities. In so doing, a feedback mechanism evolves for helping teachers take up student monitoring roles.

Online education as collaboration. Administrators had concerns about how related services are provided to students in the online learning environment as well as how the role of parental support impacts student learning outcomes. Most of the administrators, even though they thought online schools were capable of providing important educational opportunities, expressed a belief that a brick and mortar

school could provide an education as a community-based experience and that online learning environments could not easily replicate this benefit:

> Personally I think one of the weaknesses of online learning and one of the concerns I have, is that in some cases we have students and families that need face-to-face interaction everyday for the welfare of the child. Online, you're not putting eyes on that child every day. There's no eyes on that child any day really even though you have contact with the family and contact with the child. That's a concern to me and that's a concern that I share out to my staff. Those families that aren't engaged. You just don't get to see them (Single school administrator).

The person who can put their eyes on the child is the parent or learning coach, as some online schools refer to it. The parent/learning coach's constant availability is paramount for the success of SWD. For example, as another administrator stated: "[A] mother wanted to be able to have her child sit and do online work while she did the laundry and other things. But this isn't like that; you have to really pay attention to what that child is doing."

> Related to the issue of educational preparation as a means for building and maintaining social networks is the issue of related service providers who provide therapies and other services to SWD. Nearly every administrator interviewed shared concerns with the ability of the online learning environment to properly staff related service providers. The administrators did see value in the related service providers but described the service provided as an undue burden they must assume in order to maintain compliance. Per one administrator:

> Providers are difficult to find. Related services can be and will be expensive. We are just getting introduced to the idea of online speech therapy, which we offer to our students. The parent has to see the value of these therapies particularly if their student benefits from it. If a student cannot be worked with the online for therapy, then a specialist needs to be brought to them directly (Multistate administrator).

Teleservices are providing part of the answer to the problem of scarce related service providers, however some teleservices have been described as being low in quantity and/or difficult to judge in terms of quality. One administrator elaborates on the difficulty of meeting demands for related service providers in the online learning environment:

> We've been really, really creative. We call hospitals for physical therapists and occupational therapists; we call assisted living centers for speech language pathologists. We just make sure that from a certification standpoint, that they are able to work with the students and that they have the correct clearance to work. We've got a fantastic system for an invoicing standpoint because we're able to make sure if you have a student who is supposed to get four sessions a month and somebody turns in an invoice with six sessions a month, it'll get flagged. We're able to contact that person and say, hey, you know, they were only supposed to have four (Multistate administrator).

Again we find these descriptions to be replete with talk of compliance. The administrators described a structure to ensure that related service providers, when found, were not overbilling for their services. This formed tension-filled—even contentious—relationships between limited human resources (providers) and limited fiscal resources (funding).

Discussion

Our study looked at the roles necessary in developing, supporting, and following through as providers of accommodations and other forms of support for SWDs in online courses. Participants included teachers, special education case managers, and single/multischool special education administrators. Each group of educators had different patterns of interaction with SWD and their parents, with more advanced administrators having almost none, and in some cases, little contact with online teachers. Most participants had started in education as teachers in traditional settings and had worked their way into their current respective positions. The migration of staff from brick and mortar to online schools spurred much of the *modus vivendi* (Goffman, 1959), but it also brought uneasiness around this *modus,* with intentions to mitigate or overcome it. The educators knew what they were trying to do in online learning was different, but they relied on the *modus* of traditional schooling to problem-solve around issues of educating SWD because laws and policies are ill-equipped to deal with online learning and because communicating laws and policies to parents is onerous and time-consuming when there is such a push to ensure students are moving through coursework in a timely (although not fully prescribed) manner. The dance of interacting around the issue of engagement elicits a pattern of consensus that drives families of SWD to keep up the course pace or find another option.

Shifting from responsibility to accountability has been described by Noddings (2013). Responsibility emerges as parents, students, and educators feel obligated to make sure that others have positive experiences. In this frame, parents do not report to teachers; teachers do not report to parents. Instead, parents and teachers communicate around students. Teachers have the most contact with students and multischool state directors have almost none, yet beliefs like "online learning is for everyone except for who it isn't" have permeated every level of the online school structure. Where do those students belong who do not belong in online learning? Apparently they belong in traditional school. Such an orientation begs further inquiry into the status of SWD, and students with other difficulties, in online schools. If all students are to have a legitimate place, what has to happen to enable that place? Policies, funding, technology, and social priorities are at stake.

With both teachers and the local SE professionals, their interviews were bound tightly to the relational responsibilities related to primary roles, accompanying concerns, and reconciliation strategies for meeting the responsibilities embedded in the roles. Each of these groups focused on monitoring students and enlisting parents as co-monitors. The behavior sought was engagement in online curriculum to complete tasks that would lead toward course completion. In undertaking this monitoring, it was necessary to interact with parents and develop interpersonal skills for mediating conflict and disagreement. It was also an important goal of the local SE professionals to make sure that SWD are enrolled in what they described as the correct type and correct number of courses with the teachers that would be most sympathetic to the students. The educators took this charge to share expertise, monitor, manage courses, and build relationship as major responsibilities. We wondered about students who had exceptionalities but who would not necessarily have an IEP. Who would be responsible for them? How would educators find out about these exceptionalities *before* problems emerge? How can these special circumstances be discovered and addressed in online schools when, as one administrator reported, "no one puts their eyes on the child?"

For school and multi-school administrators, their distance from the students and teachers made it more difficult for them to articulate responsibility; the focus typically was on accountability. The further up the line of authority we moved in our interviews with administrators, the more accountability language we found in their descriptions of their roles. Noddings (2013) argued that an accountability-centric focus is a problem because it causes people to become overly worried with self-validation through structures like compliance. This compliance rhetoric is exactly the cause of the tensions articulated by the school and regional administrators. Even though the administrators hoped teachers would be sympathetic and

sensitive, they hired teachers to make their role as compliance officers easier to manage. At all levels (teachers, specialists, administrators) there was a push to make parents accountable for student learning, especially for students with disabilities.

Another problem with compliance and "living it," one multischool administrator explained, is that it starts to look like *institutional isomorphism*—a theory which argues that when resources and polices are shared, entities will come to resemble one another (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As online schools try to become a more attractive option for families, their efforts to ensure personalized student learning and teacher productivity override efforts to provide individualized accommodations in accordance with current disability law. The current difficulties in reconciling technologically-based personalization with legal individualization puts online school at risk of looking more like traditional public school in areas in which the public schools have received the most criticism—namely the autocracy and technical, impersonal ways of interacting with stakeholders (Waller, 1932).

Recommendations and Directions for Future Research

While our study was not designed to produce generalizable results, the fact that these educators—representing an array of programs in various geographical, political, and technological terrains—were able to crystalize on several important points lends trustworthiness to our findings (Richardson, 2008). Directors of online learning programs and advocates for online learning can read the findings and determine for themselves what might resonate, which is the true goal of any qualitative study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Findings from this study suggest a need to further explore the relationship between administrators of online learning programs and their preparation to effectively construct roles that acknowledge the complexity of working with SWD in online settings when much of the policy protections afforded to SWDs were designed to give them access to a school building and specially trained people inside it. Further, there are few provisions for students who have exceptionalities who do not have IEPs. Section 504 is contingent on self-advocacy and if parents feel their child (or children) would be better off without the label of exceptionality, and since the online environment allows parents to choose whether or not to disclose such information, they may not do so.

The administrators in this study revealed that they had been selected for advancement from a pool of online teachers already in a school, network, or under a vendor's employment, but most had not taught as extensively online as they had in traditional settings. Not only is preparation to teach important for learning the laws and designing lessons that optimize technologies in these settings, but also for preparing educators to think about long term interactions with various people within the entire online school system, and not just in online classrooms (Archambault & Kennedy, 2012).

Considering the trajectory from traditional teaching to online teaching to online administrating, more research is needed on teacher preparedness to not just educate in the online environment, but how to help teachers move between these environments smoothly. In turn, transitioning from online teaching to online administrating or even traditional teaching to online administrating deserves practical, empirical, and policy attention. In this frame, online schools will be better positioned to avoid the more problematic aspects of the traditional institutions from which they flow and cultivate an atmosphere of responsibility for all children.

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