

## Early Career Special Education Teachers Perceived Value of Being Mentored By General Education Teachers

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Special education induction research has examined mentor support and working conditions of early career special education teachers (ECSETs) for over 20 years. Recently researchers provide specialized professional development to mentors based on suggestions of special education induction research. Drawing on quality indicators of single-subject research and the belief that social validity data is valuable, we used qualitative methods to discover ECSETs' perceptions of the intervention and the helpfulness of the mentors. We then compared responses of the participants with the existing research in special education induction. Findings indicate the participants appreciated the specialized training for their mentors and perceived their mentors as helpful and affected their teaching experiences. However, similar to existing research, the participants had mixed feelings about their working conditions.

*Keywords:* early career special education teachers, mentoring supports, working conditions, social validity

Special education teacher (SET) preparation programs have a complex undertaking of preparing candidates with intricate specialized knowledge (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010). Candidates must leave their preparation programs with an understanding of multiple evidence-based instructional practices, all of the disability areas, collaboration skills, and legal compliance. As if that was not enough, they must also know the general education standards for math and English Language Arts as well as the ability to retrieve this information and apply it at a

moment's notice to a wide range of age and ability levels across multiple settings (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015). Sindelar, Brownell, and Billingsley (2010) recognize this challenge and state, "It is difficult to prepare SETs for all the formidable challenges they will face as they begin their work in schools" (p. 15). Sindelar and colleagues suggest that mentoring by a veteran special educator can help mediate challenges.

Mentoring has been studied in business and medicine but is a relatively new research area in special education

(Israel, Kamman, McCray, & Sindelar, 2014). Ingersoll and Strong (2012) refer to mentoring practices in education as “a bridge” to facilitate the change from a “student of teaching to a teacher of students” (p. 468). Mentoring is the most common induction practice of school districts to ease the transition into the profession (Billingsley, Griffin, Smith, Kamman, & Israel, 2009). It is so commonplace that the term mentoring and induction are often used interchangeably (Fletcher & Strong, 2009). As such, 48 states have mentoring programs mandated as part of their induction practices (Hirsch et al., 2009), despite evidence that one-third of early career special educators (ECSEs) do not find the practice helpful or beneficial (Billingsley, 2004). Sindelar et al., (2010) suggest the reported negative feelings by ECSEs could be due to unresponsive programs or a mismatch between mentor and ECSE.

The purpose of this case study was to determine the perceptions of ECSEs’ who were mentored by veteran mentors who received specialized professional development and coaching. We discuss ECSEs’ perception of their mentors, the impact on their instructional practices, and school working conditions, present findings from the case study, as well as implications of the findings on future research, mentoring programs, and induction policy. We provide recommendations for future research addressing the mentoring supports provided to and working conditions of ECSEs

### **Mentoring Styles**

Mentors often have different roles and attitudes about their induction responsibilities. The induction literature presents two predominant styles of mentoring: an *educative role model* and a

*buddy* (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). An *educative role model* is a person who coaches, provides instructional as well as emotional support, facilitates reflective conversations, and exemplifies professionalism for the early career teacher to model their practice (Carver & Feiman-Nemser, 2008; Fletcher & Strong, 2009). A *buddy* mentor provides some emotional support but views their role predominantly as a guide to school routines and district policies (Feiman-Nemser & Carver 2012; Fletcher & Strong, 2009).

Israel and her colleagues (2014) introduced a business mentoring model by Kram (1983) to be considered for use in special education induction practices. Kram posits that various duties and actions taken by mentors are necessary to induct young professionals into business. Submitting that mentors are able to assist novices in sharpening their skills that can lead to career progression as well as improve self-efficacy that develops emotional well-being. Both proficiency of skills and emotional fulfillment are needed for career satisfaction (Ghosh, 2013). Although new to education, this model provides promise for special education teacher retention.

Unfortunately, special educators in urban schools do not experience a high level of career satisfaction and often leave the profession. Fall and Billingsley (2011) attribute higher turnover in high needs districts to lack of resources, larger and more diverse student caseloads, and less supportive school cultures. These three factors would impact any teacher’s ability to plan and deliver quality instruction, but they are more problematic for teachers that have not mastered their craft. Additionally, Ingersoll & Strong (2011) note that high needs schools are more likely to assign buddy mentors to serve as district or school

tour guides rather than classroom educative role models to facilitate development of instructional practices. Buddy mentors may help to create better collegial relationships and enhance feelings of school cohesiveness but do not extend pedagogical learning (Fletcher & Strong, 2009).

Additionally, buddy mentors are not purposefully assigned based on certification area (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). This can be problematic for special educators who are learning to implement the specialized skills needed to be improve outcomes for students with disabilities (Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2003). The use of buddy mentors in high needs school districts may be directly linked to the limited number of special educators due to personnel shortages as well as the unique nature of special education reported by Boe and colleagues (2008). These shortages leave few experienced special educators to mentor ECSEs. Such is the case in one mid-Atlantic urban school district. A professional development opportunity was created for this district to prepare general education mentors (GEMs) for their mentor roles with ECSE.

This study presents the perceptions of the ECSEs that were mentored by GEMs who received specialized professional development. We specifically wanted to know about mentoring supports received and working conditions experienced in their urban school district. To that aim, we explored the following questions: (a) was the mentor helpful in the ECSE's transition to teaching?; (b) how did the mentor support the ECSE's instructional practice?; (c) what specific actions did the mentor take to support the ECSE?; and (d) what other supports or obstacles led to ECSE intention to leave or remain in the classroom?

### **Why Another Case Study On The Subject?**

This study represents the social validity findings within a single case study that examined the effects of specialized mentor preparation and coaching for GEMs supporting ECSEs. Leko (2014) encourages researchers to apply rigorous qualitative methods in social validity research to expand researchers' understanding of interventions and the consumers' appreciation of the intervention within the natural setting of the school environment. Cook and Odom (2013) state, "Implementation is the critical link between research and practice" (p.138). Using qualitative methods to discover consumer satisfaction of interventions could help researchers understand why interventions are, or are not, implemented after formal support is removed.

Another reason to explore this study is that induction literature has reported mixed results on the effectiveness of mentors to provide helpful support of ECSEs (Billingsley et al., 2009). Within special education literature, specific mentoring programs are limited. The specialized professional development and coaching for this study was designed based on suggestions of mentor training (Billingsley, 2005), and effective high-quality special education instruction (Brownell et al., 2010) for the purpose of developing educative role model mentors for ECSEs. Because no specific mentoring programs in special education have been studied with GEMs, it is important to determine if this program led to increased positive perceptions for ECSEs, improved instructional practices, and intentions to remain in the field. By answering these questions, districts can make informed decisions about implementing specialized mentoring

development programs and how best to support ECSEs in the future.

### **Methodology**

The present study is part of a larger study that examined the professional development and coaching of mentors with general education certifications supporting first and second year special education teachers (Authors, in review). Six mentors took part in a year-long professional development that provided specific instruction on special education knowledge and instructional practices. Two mentors received individualized coaching at their school sites in addition to the professional development. This study focuses on the perceptions of two ECSEs whose mentors received both pieces of the intervention. However, because the focus of the intervention (i.e. knowledge of special education, identifying components of special education lesson delivery) were two of the research questions within the larger study, it is important to note that all participants did increase their special education knowledge and noticeably increased their ability to identify components of special education lesson delivery. These improvements enabled the mentors to provide more informed performance feedback to the ECSEs following instructional observations.

Throughout the study, the first author and a research assistant observed weekly ECSE's instructional delivery and occasional post observation feedback conferences with GEMs and ECSEs. We then conducted interviews with ECSEs and used cross-case thematic analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). We investigated the commonality of themes reported by each ECSE and compared themes across special education induction literature to discover

similarities and differences in perceptions of ECSEs over time.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Creswell (2014) asserts that a researchers' approach to a study is influenced by their philosophical worldview and potential biases should be explicitly shared. The first author presents her philosophical worldview and background, because she directed methodological decisions. She is a monolingual female of European descent. Although currently a faculty member at a mid-Western public university, she spent over a decade as a teacher in PK-12 schools. Primarily supporting students with high-incidence disabilities, she also provided professional development and mentored teachers who included students with disabilities in general education classrooms. She believes no school has just one school culture and each individual holds different perceptions of their value and status within the school. She believes that administrators set the tone of acceptance within a school by words and actions, but also knows other faculty members influence peer interactions and opinions. These beliefs were constructed during various experiences as a teacher and faculty member in multiple states and internationally. It is predictable, therefore, that this study was designed from a social constructivists' worldview. Principles of this worldview center around the belief that meaning and understandings are not given to humans. Each individual makes sense of the world based on personal experiences, using their own historical and social context to create meaning (Crotty, 1998). This worldview explains why individuals experience the same event and hear the same statement, but each perceives them differently.

### **Participants**

Two ECSEs were invited to participate in the study by their mentor. The ECSEs' mentors participated in a larger study designed to investigate the effects of a specially designed mentoring program, including professional development and individualized coaching. Renee (pseudonym) was a second year teacher and taught in Classroom A. Shelly (pseudonym) was a first year teacher who taught in Classroom B. Both ECSEs received their certification through alternative routes programs.

### **Setting**

This study took place in a Mid-Atlantic urban school district. The student body is composed of 83.8% African American, 8% Caucasian, and 6.2% Hispanic/Latino. Approximately 85% of students receive free or reduced meals. Students with disabilities make up 15.4% of the student population. Current retention rates project 65% of all newly hired teachers will remain into their third year. The study took place in two elementary schools with demographics matching district reports. Both ECSEs taught students who required more intensive interventions and received less than 40 percent of their instruction in the general education classroom. Classroom A included eight to 14 students with high-incidence disabilities in the third through fifth grade. Classroom B included seven to ten fifth-grade students identified with high-incidence disabilities.

### **Data Sources**

There were two primary sources of data, the researchers' field notes and recorded interviews. The PI and research assistant observed the ECSEs instructional delivery weekly. Each scored the ECSEs' instructional delivery and took notes on her implementation of the targeted strategies,

interaction with students, and student responses.

Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted with participants to discuss early career experiences and perceptions. The PI interviewed the ECSEs, to determine their perceptions of their mentors, the helpfulness of the actions taken by the mentor, and their working conditions. The ECSEs were also asked about their intention to remain in teaching and to what extent they believed the mentor or the working conditions impacted their decision. Initial questions were determined prior to the study. During the interview the PI would ask ECSEs to add detail or expound upon initial answers.

### **Procedures**

A professional development and coaching program was specifically designed for a district that does not intentionally match mentors and early career teachers based on certification. Site-based mentors are selected based on evaluation reports, principal recommendations, and school assignment (S. Warburton-Barnes, personal communication, March 25, 2015). The professional development, eight two and half-hour sessions, provided general education mentors (GEM) with an understanding of special education and strategies to support ECSEs. Following the yearlong professional development and individualized coaching program designed to increase district site-based mentors' ability to support ECSEs, researchers interviewed the ECSEs.

In addition to the professional development, two mentors were selected to receive weekly individualized coaching at their school site following their observations of the ECSE's instruction. Selection was based on the participant's

ability to be released from teaching duties to observe weekly instruction of the ECSE. Coaching sessions included the GEM: (a) discussing her perception of the ECSE's classroom practices; (b) receiving feedback and strategies to offer the ECSE; (c) detailing the feedback she intended to provide in the post-observation conference; and (d) reflecting upon their understanding of special education practices.

Following the intervention study, we interviewed the GEMs and ECSEs of the mentors who received individualized coaching. The present study focuses on the observations and interviews of the ECSEs. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes; the researcher audio recorded each session and loaded interviews to a shared data file so that the researcher and research assistant could both access and listen to recordings. As the principle investigator, the first author took the lead in the data coding and analysis. The analysis was performed at two levels, within and across cases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Six steps were used to perform data analysis: (a) each interview was reviewed in its entirety and preliminary notes were taken; (b) statements were extracted and logged in an Excel spreadsheet, (c) each statement was coded, (d) codes were used to categorize themes within each case, (e) cross-case analysis was used to connect themes across cases, and (f) commonality of themes were compared to existing literature.

Additionally, credibility and trustworthiness of the findings were obtained in multiple ways. During interviews, the researcher embedded member checking to verify interpretation of participants' statements. The researcher and research assistant routinely debriefed after observations and compared field notes. During the analysis, we intentionally looked for exceptions and disconfirming evidence.

### **Results**

The purpose of this case study was to determine the impact of mentors who received professional development and individualized coaching to support ECSEs, and to identify school working conditions that influenced the participants' intent to remain in the field. We were able to identify four major themes: mentor helpfulness, mentors' influence on instructional practice, mentor actions, and supports or obstacles impacting the ECSEs' career intentions (see Table 1 for a complete overview). There were commonalities in the actions and support the mentors provided and obstacles perceived regarding administration and paperwork. However, the two ECSEs had different experiences with their colleagues: one felt isolated and one felt supported. Interestingly, the ECSE who felt isolated decided to remain in the field, while the ECSE with supportive colleagues decided to leave the classroom. We offer possible suggestions in our discussion.

Table 1

*Overview of Research; Alignment of Key Themes and Implications*

Study	Key Themes	Implications for the Field
Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Helpfulness</li> <li>• Mentor Influence on Instructional Practices</li> <li>• Supports and Obstacles Impacting Career Intentions</li> </ul>	Mentors and administrators should understand the role and responsibilities of special educators. Mentors and ECSE should engage in collaborative planning and discussion of instruction to increase ECSE confidence of their practice. Mentors can help mediate obstacles (e.g., access to materials, build positive school climate) that encourage career retention.
Fall & Billingsley, (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Actions</li> </ul>	Mentors should teach ECSE's how to locate and analyze potential materials and resources
Fletcher & Strong (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Influence on Instructional Practice</li> <li>• Mentor Actions</li> </ul>	Mentors should observe ECSE and help them reflect on their practice. Full time mentors (those released from teaching duties) can have more positive influence on ECSE's practice and thereby have better outcomes for students earlier in the teacher's career.
Gehrke & Murri, (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Helpfulness</li> <li>• Mentor Influence on Instructional Practices</li> <li>• Mentor Actions</li> <li>• Supports and Obstacles Impacting Career Intentions</li> </ul>	Mentors should understand and help communicate the role and responsibilities of special educators to schools. Mentors should provide targeted professional development to increase ECSE confidence of their practice. Mentors can help mediate obstacles (e.g., access to materials, build positive school climate) that encourage career retention.

Note: ECSE = Early career special educator

Table 1 continued

Study	Key Themes	Implications for the Field
Israel, Kamman, McCray, & Sindelar (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Influence on Instructional Practices</li> <li>• Mentor Actions</li> </ul>	Mentors can provide both emotional and professional support. When emotional support is embedded within targeted professional support. Explicit engagement with instructional practice can increase ECSE level of commitment to the profession.
Irinaga-Bistolas, Schalock, Marvin & Beck, (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Helpfulness</li> <li>• Mentor Influence on Instructional Practices</li> </ul>	Mentors should understand and help communicate the role and responsibilities of special educators to schools. Mentors and ECSE should engage in collaborative planning and discussion of instruction to increase ECSE confidence of their practice.
Matsko (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Actions</li> </ul>	Mentors should provide targeted professional development to increase ECSE confidence of their practice. Support should also be offered to locate or create supplemental materials.
Whitaker (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Helpfulness</li> <li>• Mentor Influence on Instructional Practices</li> <li>• Mentor Actions</li> </ul>	Mentors should understand the role and responsibilities of special educators. Explicit engagement with instructional practice can increase ECSE level of commitment to the profession.
Wood, Jilk, & Paine, (2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor Actions</li> </ul>	Mentors should teach ECSE's how to locate supplemental materials and resources.

Note: ECSE = Early Career Special Educator



### Helpfulness of Mentors

Our first research question asked if their mentors were helpful in ECSEs' transition to the profession. This question was based on the proposed future directions of special education research suggested by Sindelar and colleagues: "We need knowledge about the extent to which specific types of exchanges [between mentor and mentee] are perceived as being helpful" (2010, p. 16). Both participants viewed their mentors as helpful and expressed gratitude for the emotional and instructional support they provided. Renee described her mentor as helpful, supportive, and caring. She knew her mentor volunteered to participate in the professional development and stated that was an example of being supportive and caring; she appreciated that her mentor sought support that would help her understand Renee's specific needs as an ECSE. Renee was a second year teacher and had her same mentor the year before. She noted the support she received during the study focused more on instruction, an area of support she felt she needed. Renee stated, "Last year, she was a big help, and she has always been supportive, but this year I felt she was really starting to get my kids and what they needed."

Shelly also expressed gratitude that her mentor volunteered for the professional development. She felt fortunate this happened during her first year in the classroom. Shelly described her mentor as caring, supportive, and inspirational; she talked about how her mentor took time to build a relationship. Shelly said, "She is there for me 100%. She is supportive and she inspires me." Having more than 30 years in education, Shelly felt her mentor still was excited about education and was grateful for the

experience she brought to the relationship. Shelly emotionally stated, "I want to be the best teacher I can be, and to know that my mentor wants that too, well, that just means everything to me." Both ECSEs had positive relationships with their mentor and agreed the mentors were helpful.

This finding has been mixed in previous literature. Billingsley, Carlson, and Klein (2004), through surveys, found that one-third of ECSEs did not find their mentor helpful. While Whitaker (2000) reported approximately one-fourth of the ECSEs did not find their mentor helpful; she linked this perception of unhelpfulness to the infrequency of mentor and ECSE interactions. In contrast, case study research reports ECSEs positive perception of mentors' helpfulness (Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Irinaga-Bistolas, Schalock, Marvin & Beck, 2007). One reason for this discrepancy between the impact of mentor support in larger scale studies using survey data and smaller case studies could be due to differences in information gathered in surveys and case study. For instance, surveys may not ask mentors for their certifications, teaching experiences, or special education knowledge. However, the case study literature reported the intentional matching of special education mentors with ECSEs. Further, surveys do not allow for elaboration as in-person interviews conducted in case studies (Billingsley et al., 2009). Due to the nature of the research, the perceptions of ECSEs may not be accurately captured, thus leading to contradicting research findings. We were pleased that not only did the participants in this study find their mentor helpful, but also instrumental in improving their instructional practices.

### **Mentor's Influence on Instructional Practices**

Mentoring is more involved than *encouraging* ECSEs. To that end, we asked participants what specific actions mentors took to support their instructional practices. Sindelar and colleagues (2010) suggest induction studies investigate mentoring practices that improve novices' instruction. Both ECSEs received instructional support. Mentors participated in professional development, observed ECSEs delivering instructions weekly, received individualized coaching, and provided performance feedback during a post-observation conference. The mentors provided strategies in three instructional domains: (a) proactive behavior management, (b) differentiation, and (c) assessment. Both ECSEs agreed differentiation was the most important domain to master and the most difficult to implement. Renee credits the differentiation coaching as helpful in her improvement as a teacher. She said she knew it was important for a special educator to plan instruction based on individual student need, but stated it was time consuming to plan instructional groups based on individualized education program (IEP) goals. Shelly also felt the most frustration with differentiating lessons for her students. She appreciated lesson planning using the students' IEP goals; however, she felt planning multiple options for students relied on resources she did not have available.

Shelly was also proud of the growth her students demonstrated. During the interview she spoke about two of her students' perseverance during high stakes testing:

"Terrance (pseudonym) just kept right on trying. He sat through the entire thing and really tried. And Chris

(pseudonym) flopped on the floor when it was over and said, 'This was a really good story but there were too many words.' The others were done in like 15 minutes. But not Terrance and Chris, they were real troopers!"

She saw their perseverance as evidence of their growth and felt she contributed to that growth by improving her ability to plan and deliver instruction that was focused on the students' instructional level. She told the researcher that she felt the students were more involved in instruction when she could articulate what they were going to learn that day and how they would learn.

Previous research on mentors' efforts to improve ECSE's instructional practices also reports positive perceptions of mentees. In case studies, researchers (Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Irinaga-Bistolas et al., 2007) found ECSEs and mentors both perceived improvement in their instructional practices when they participated in weekly meetings together, collaboratively planned, discussed instructional practices, and reflected in teaching journals. Similarly, survey studies (Billingsley et al., 2004; Whitaker 2000) found ECSEs appreciated support with instructional practice. Whitaker reported a statistically significant correlation with the ECSEs' perception of mentor instructional supports and their intentions to remain in the field of special education. The ECSEs' perception that GEMs helped to improve their instructional practices endorses the position of mentors as educative role models. The participants of this study also found actions taken by the mentors as helpful and meaningful to their instruction.

### **Mentor Actions**

Both ECSEs experienced difficulty in locating resources and were grateful to their mentors for the extra resources they

provided. These resources ranged from extra teaching materials and manipulatives to arranging for professional development and support from the district office. The ECSEs had different experiences obtaining additional resources. While both ECSEs relied on their mentors to some extent, Renee was able to get materials and resources from colleagues; Shelly was more dependent on her mentor. Both mentors shared materials from their personal reserve and arranged for the ECSEs to attend grade level planning meetings to collaborate with peers. Renee's colleagues were more welcoming and offered emotional encouragement and additional materials: "[the teacher next door] is always sending me manipulatives and lesson ideas." However, Shelly's colleagues did not include her in the planning meetings. By the spring, they stopped including her in emails detailing meeting times and places. Shelly was not only excluded from grade level meetings, her colleagues did not share resources or materials needed to support instruction.

Another resource mentors provided was extra professional development and support. Renee's mentor, Cathleen (pseudonym), contacted the district office of special education and requested a content liaison to come to the school and work with Renee to differentiate her math instruction. Renee had eight students during math instruction and was uncertain how to meet all of their needs. The liaison helped Renee set up learning centers, develop a plan to rotate students through centers, and create direct instruction time based on students' academic needs. Renee stated it was time consuming, but after a week she could see a difference in her students' participation and learning. Similarly, Shelly's mentor, Joan

(pseudonym), provided additional professional development opportunities for differentiation; she arranged for Shelly to observe and speak to another special educator who successfully implemented learning centers. Shelly appreciated this support, but stated, "That would never work with my kids in my room." The mentor inquired about local professional organizations and tried to secure funding for Shelly to attend a state Council of Exceptional Children conference. Unfortunately, the administrator did not fund Shelly's request.

Both mentors advocated for their ECSEs. Cathleen intervened on Renee's behalf with the administrator on instructional philosophy, while Joan advocated for Shelly to receive paraprofessional support. Early in the school year, Renee's administrator voiced concern that her class seemed unfocused and she took too much time to teach concepts. The administrator suggested Renee follow the fourth grade math curriculum because most of her students were at that grade level; she taught students in grades 3 through 5, all with performance levels below grade level. Renee's mentor, Cathleen, began to appreciate the difference between general and special education instruction after participating in the professional development. Cathleen conveyed to the researcher, "There really is a difference in expectations, isn't there?" Cathleen shared what she had learned to the administrator and successfully advocated for Renee to be given flexibility following district curriculum pacing guidelines.

Unfortunately, Shelly's administrator did not have high academic expectations for her students. During formal observations, he addressed her lack

of classroom management and not her instruction. Shelly supported three students with moderate behavior concerns and without the support of her paraprofessional, all instruction stopped to address student behaviors. Although Shelly was assigned a paraprofessional, the administrator continually pulled the paraprofessional to perform other duties (e.g., substitute teacher, cafeteria monitor) instead of requesting a substitute or the assistance of other school personnel. Joan spoke with the administrator and successfully advocated not only for keeping the paraprofessional in the classroom but also the need for a behavioral specialist to come to the school to consult with Shelly.

Mentoring is labor intensive. The mentors provided more than emotional support for their ECSEs; they coached them on instructional practices, provided resources and professional development opportunities, and advocated for their ECSEs. These mentors were fully released from teaching duties and were able to dedicate approximately 90 minutes a week to mentoring the ECSEs. Mentoring was not their only duty, but it is clear if they were also teaching, not all of these activities would have occurred.

As reported earlier, previous research also credits actions of mentors related to instructional support as important (Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Irinaga-Bistolas et al., 2007; Israel, et al., 2014; Whitaker, 2000). Induction research relative to high needs schools (Fall & Billingsley, 2011, Fletcher & Strong, 2009; Matsko, 2010) reported early career teachers were frustrated with the lack of curriculum materials available through the district. In relation to this finding, some studies (Matsko 2010; Wood, Jilk, & Paine, 2012) discuss the need for mentors to help

novices supplement the school provided materials. Early career teachers surveyed in Matsko's study rated mentoring sessions that included "make and take" work sessions as one they favored. Early career teachers described creating supplemental materials as helpful and allowed them to think more critically about the curriculum and their students' needs in addressing the curriculum. Similar to our study, Wood et al., (2012) also reported mentors used personal resources (e.g., curriculum supports, manipulatives) to support mentees.

Similar to Israel and colleagues (2014) the ECSEs in our study did not separate the emotional support they received from the instructional support. They believed the two were interdependent and therefore spoke of the assistance to improve instructional practices as emotional support. Both also recognized the mentors' intervening with administrators and advocating for them demonstrated both instructional and emotional support. Renee stated her mentor increased her confidence by improving her instructional practices: "She has always been encouraging and I don't feel judged...but now when she comes in it seems more focused on math and better instruction." Renee felt that Cathleen's new understanding of special education created a stronger bond between the two. Shelly said of her mentor, "She is there for me 100%. She is supportive and she inspires me." She also felt grateful that her mentor actively sought knowledge and support of special education: "I want to be the best teacher I can be, and to know that my mentor wants that too, well, that just means everything to me."

### Supports and Obstacles Guiding Career Intentions

The ECSEs received several supports from their mentor. However, we wanted to know what supports or obstacles led to the ECSEs intention to remain or leave the field. Poor working conditions (e.g., support from administration, role ambiguity, manageable workload, isolation from peers, availability of resources) are consistently reported in special education induction studies as obstacles for ECSEs (Bettini, Crocket, Brownell, & Merrill, 2016; Billingsley et al., 2009). Both ECSEs felt their mentors, and the activities and supports the mentor provided, were crucial supports in their transition. Renee said her mentor was very important, but she also appreciated her colleagues. Shelly shared her mentor was vital to her “surviving this year.” In contrast, both ECSEs felt their administrators, paperwork, lesson planning, and lack of materials were their biggest obstacles. Both participants were concerned with information from their interviews getting back to their administrators. Renee specifically asked, “You aren’t going to play this for her, are you?” They spoke to the fear of speaking up and the repercussions it would have on their jobs. We assured them the interview would not be shared with administrators and if accepted for publication, they and their schools would be given pseudonyms for anonymity.

Each ECSE in our study was asked what they wish they could tell their administrator. Renee wished that her administrator understood her job and that she could explain all that goes into it, including the amount of time and effort she devoted to lesson planning. She did not believe the administrator knew “how much time goes into planning for so many grade levels, not to mention the different ability

levels of my students.” She expressed both developing differentiated lesson plans and searching for resources consumed much of her time; she felt the administrator saw her as incompetent because she could not do this as “quickly as everyone else.” She reported the administrator questioned why she needed help from outside the school: “She doesn’t understand I need to create lessons based on student IEP goals. No one here can show me how to do that.”

Shelly also felt intimidated to speak to the administrator. After verifying her responses were confidential, she expressed that she wanted to explain to her administrator that “*effective* in my classroom does not look like effective in the general education class, or even another special education classroom.” She wished he understood that victories for students with disabilities “may look small, but they are huge.” She felt unfairly judged when he came into her room twice a year to check a box that indicated her effectiveness based on one day’s instruction.

Both ECSEs were intimidated and frustrated by their administrators. They spoke about avoiding the administrator as much as possible. For Renee, the administrator is the reason she cited for leaving, while Shelly described her administrator as “just one more thing to deal with.” Many special education induction studies report ECSEs’ feelings of role ambiguity and lack of administrator support. Billingsley and her colleagues (2004) found the majority of ECSEs felt their administrator was supportive; however, only 76% felt administrators understood their role. In contrast, Gehrke and Murri (2006) reported five of the eight ECSEs did not feel supported by administrators, and

all believed their role as a special educator was not clearly defined.

Renee and Shelly both had shared feelings and experiences with special education paperwork. Renee talked about the difficulty keeping up with the vast amounts of paperwork. She again expressed displeasure with her administrator and stated she did not fully understand the individualized nature of an IEP. The administrator asked Renee why IEPs took so much effort. It was the administrator's understanding that since the district had adopted online IEPs, the entire process was done for the teachers. Renee said she was never taught how to write an IEP and was confused with the progress monitoring requirements. Shelly had a similar experience and laughed about her experiences writing IEPs, "I didn't know anything about how to write an IEP in September, so I just muddled through." Although both ECSEs reported feeling overwhelmed with paperwork, neither saw this impacting their decision to stay or leave. Similarly, previous research discusses completing paperwork and meeting legal requirements, as another factor in ECSEs' job satisfaction (Billingsley et al., 2009).

The ECSEs were grateful to their mentors for helping them acquire more resources and materials; however, they did not have what they considered essential. Renee reported the school purchased her math curriculum for one grade level, even though she was responsible for three grade levels with differing student abilities. She reported spending a great deal of time searching the Internet and talking to colleagues about what she should teach. Shelly also spoke to the considerable amount of time she spent looking for appropriate resources for her students. However, unlike Renee, Shelly was not

comfortable asking her colleagues for help. She acknowledged their reluctance could be due to their own limited resources, but felt it was because "they just don't like my kids." Limited resources and materials contributed to both ECSEs' frustration, but neither felt it had an impact on their career decisions.

The ECSEs had different experiences with their colleagues. One viewed colleagues as a support and one viewed colleagues as an obstacle. Renee said she considered many of the other teachers as friends. She recognized that without their availability and support, she would not have been as successful. Conversely, Shelly felt isolated by her colleagues. She felt they did not collaborate with her or welcome her students. She said when she and her students came to the cafeteria, she saw other teachers "roll their eyes and sigh." This is an interesting finding because; Shelly who felt isolated has decided to remain in teaching while Renee intends to leave.

### **Career Intentions**

Both ECSEs had successful relationships with their mentors, struggled with securing resources, completing paperwork, and viewed their administrator as unhelpful. They differed, though, in their experiences with the relationships they established with their colleagues. They viewed their mentors as helpful and essential to completing their jobs. They viewed their administrators as obstacles and felt unappreciated. Renee did express gratitude for her colleagues and for their support, while Shelly reported feelings of isolation.

Renee was very open when asked about her experience as a special educator and her plans for the future. Renee decided not to return to the classroom the following school year. This was due to her experience

with her administrator, and not her mentor. Renee stated how grateful she was to her mentor for getting her support from the district special education liaison, but she felt the administrator resented this additional help. Unfortunately, as much as Renee felt the mentor increased her confidence and instructional practice, she felt the administrator's inability to understand the job of the ECSE was more detrimental and cited this as the leading reason she would be leaving the classroom.

Contrarily, Shelly, who appeared to have a more isolating experience, had different career intentions. Shelly was eager to talk about her future in special education and her plan to remain in the classroom. She was proud of the growth her students demonstrated and became emotional when she spoke of her future: "I've had a hard time. Our team is not very collaborative. The behavior support people don't support my kids or me. The administrator... well, he just isn't there. But I can't leave." She feels small victories for students are huge victories that she wants to help provide and celebrate. She is investigating graduate programs to pursue a master's degree in special education: "I can't imagine doing anything else." She contributed a large part of this decision was due to support from her mentor.

### **Discussion**

Renee and Shelly both appreciated the support they received from their mentors and described the support as helpful. They appreciated that they had weekly scheduled meetings to discuss their progress and just "check in" with their mentors (Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Irinaga-Bistolas et al., 2007). Both spoke about the non-evaluative feedback (Billingsley et al., 2009; Gehrke & McCoy, 2007) they received from their mentors after observations.

Renee said she was able to survive the year because of the feedback and encouragement she received from her mentor: "She was able to see what I was doing on a regular basis, and so when she told me I was doing a good job, I knew she meant it." Shelly said, "That was the best, because she saw my growth and my students' growth over time."

Additionally, both ECSEs valued their mentors for mediating with administrators. After participating in the special education professional development sessions, both mentors better understood the difference between general education and special education instructional expectations and practice. This new understanding enabled Cathleen to advocate for Renee when the administrator wanted her to teach the fourth grade math curriculum. Joan explained why the paraprofessional was needed in the special education classroom, which reduced the amount of time the paraprofessional was pulled for duties not related to special education supports.

Like many reports of ECSEs' first year perceptions (Billingsley, 2004; Whitaker, 2003), Renee and Shelly both spoke of excessive amounts of paperwork, unsupportive administrators, and role confusion. Similar to reports of ESCETs' experiences in high-poverty school districts (Fall & Billingsley, 2011), the ECSEs of this study spoke to lack of resources. One difference was Renee reported a more positive school culture than Shelly reported. Renee said she enjoyed working with her colleagues and felt they went out of their way to welcome her and her students. Shelly, however, stated, "This school is a very divisive environment." She was unable to seek assistance from colleagues for resources. Like other accounts of ECSE experiences (Gehrke & McCoy 2007), Shelly

reported feeling isolated. She reported the fifth grade staff did not want her students to be included with their students during lunch and special classes (e.g., art, P.E.). It is important for mentors to facilitate collaborative relationships between general educators and ECSEs to improve their perception of colleagues and improve the experiences of ECSEs.

The perceptions of the ECSEs' school climate differed; there were different outcomes in their decisions whether to stay in the classroom. Renee stated her experience was "too overwhelming" to stay, citing an unsupportive and unknowledgeable administrator as the main reasons for leaving. She felt the administrator did not understand her role as a special educator; she wished the administrator understood two areas of a special educator's job. First was the amount of work put into planning for multiple grade levels and the wide range of academic levels (Billingsley et al., 2009; Fall & Billingsley, 2011). Second was the amount of time spent writing IEPs (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Whitaker, 2003). Renee is leaving the classroom. She does not see herself remaining in public K-12 education in any capacity.

Shelly, however, could not imagine a career outside of the classroom. This was a pleasant surprise because she often spoke of the unwelcoming school culture. Shelly admitted she felt isolated (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007) and the administrator and grade level colleagues were unsupportive (Fall & Billingsley, 2011). Shelly wished the fifth grade teachers would welcome her students. She wanted her administrator to know effective instruction looked different in her classroom than her peers (Brownell et al., 2010). Shelly was proud of the growth her students exhibited. She credited her

student's success to the mentor's action as well as her own efforts.

Both ECSEs reported increased confidence in their abilities. They valued the non-evaluative feedback they received from their mentors, the weekly observations and conferences, and their help in locating needed resources. Although the two ECSEs had different experiences with their colleagues, neither cited this as influential in their career intentions. Their perceptions of the support they received from their mentors were positive, while their perceptions of the support they received from their administrators were not.

### **Limitations**

The findings reported here cannot be generalized to all first and second year ECSEs. The interviews took place with two ECSEs in one school district. Both teachers were in elementary self-contained, special education classrooms. Therefore, the perceptions of elementary and secondary teachers working in inclusive classroom were not included. Other ECSEs may have different experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, the ECSEs in this study taught in a high-poverty, high-minority urban district producing another limitation, the inability to generalize to suburban or rural districts. Finally, although there are similarities to previous research, these findings do not imply the perceptions of these ECSEs are identical to other ECSEs across the country, as this study took place in one city of the United States.

### **Future Research**

One finding is that although Renee expressed more support (e.g., colleagues, district specialists) than Shelly, she will be leaving public education. This finding provides support to study the professional and personal dispositions of ECSEs and determine how perseverance and other



personal traits are linked to teacher retention rates. A second area of research that will be important to investigate is to determine how school districts use induction research to design induction programs, specifically mentoring programs. School districts acknowledge that they place mentors without special education experience and knowledge with ECSEs during the first years (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). It is imperative we study the professional development provided to mentors that facilitates supporting ECSEs' growth. Mentors need professional development and supports that promote a deeper understanding of students with disabilities and the specialized instruction these students need to achieve higher academic outcomes. If the same early career experiences are appearing in research 20 years after first being reported, it could imply school districts simply offer induction supports due to state mandates (Hirsch et al., 2009) without adjusting supports based on review and evaluation of programs. Finally, since these participants entered teaching through alternative certification agencies, we suggest studying the differences in ECSE based on preparation and certification program. Researchers (Billingsley et al., 2009; Boe et al., 2008) suggest ECSEs with less rigorous preparation will need more intensive mentoring supports. Therefore, as more urban school districts use alternative certification agencies (Sass, 2011), we need to understand the mentoring supports these districts are able to provide and the impact those supports have on special education teacher retention.

### **Conclusion**

The participants in this study found their mentor helpful. They listed regularly

scheduled meetings, instructional support, collaborative planning, and special education specific resources as the most beneficial supports. Neither participant found their administrator supportive or understanding of special education instruction. They found the paperwork and legal requirements of special education time consuming and overwhelming, but this factor did not impact their decision to remain or leave the classroom setting. While there were differences in school climate, the findings contradict previous research. The ECSE, Renee, with the most welcoming and supportive colleagues, choose to leave special education; and Shelly, with little colleague support and more feelings of isolation, reported intentions to remain.

Although we were not surprised by the similarities of ECSEs' negative perceptions over time, we are troubled that special education induction literature has not had a larger impact on induction practices for special educators. We believe as a field it will benefit us to follow the suggestions of Sindelar and colleagues (2010) in developing a focused research agenda that identifies distinct induction practices that improve the instructional practices of ECSEs. It will also be important for researchers as well as practitioners to adopt a framework of mentoring that embeds emotional support within instructional supports as suggested by Israel and colleagues (2014). Mentors are an instrumental component of any induction program, developing a clear understanding of what a mentor does to support ECSEs as well as improve their instructional practice will strengthen their role and build purposeful mentor training programs.

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