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Administrators' Roles: Providing Special Educators with Opportunities to Learn and Enact Effective Reading Practices for Students With EBD

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Abstract

Special educators are responsible for providing quality reading instruction to students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), but they often experience difficulties fulfilling this responsibility, especially for students with EBD who are placed in dedicated settings, including self-contained classes. Administrators can help by ensuring special educators have what they need to provide effective reading instruction. We highlight how administrators can leverage special educators' working conditions to improve the reading instruction that students with EBD receive in self-contained settings.

Keywords

reading instruction, self-contained settings, working conditions, students with emotional and behavioral disorders

Lincoln Elementary[1] *is home to a dedicated program for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Led by a special educator, Ms. Stevens, the program is intended to support students with EBD in their home district. Program goals include ensuring students' safety, developing the requisite academic and behavioral skills, and, when applicable, transitioning students back into general education classroom settings. At present, however, Ms. Moretta, Lincoln Elementary's principal, is worried that students, in her words, "aren't making the gains in literacy that we'd like . . . . The reading levels aren't where we want them to be."*

Ms. Moretta knows that reading proficiency is crucial for the present and future success of the school's students, but is not quite sure what to do address their lack of reading progress. She knows Ms. Stevens has a very challenging job —"probably the hardest job in the school." Ms. Stevens has recently announced that she will resign her position at the end of this year. Ms. Moretta wants to understand how she could have better supported Ms. Stevens and increase the likelihood that the incoming teacher, Ms. Jones, will provide high-quality reading instruction, that students will achieve appropriate reading gains, and that Ms. Jones will be less likely to leave her new position at the end of her first year.

Dedicated classes, such as self-contained classes or schools for students with EBD, exist to provide effective, intensive, and individualized instruction in social–emotional and academic skills to students with significant behavioral challenges (Rozalski et al., 2010). These classrooms or schools are part of a continuum of placements available through the least restrictive environment provision of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), and approximately 35% of students with EBD nationally learn in self-contained settings (Office of Special Education Programs, 2017), including separate classes within typical neighborhood schools and separate schools such as therapeutic day schools (Rozalski et al., 2010).

Effective reading instruction is especially important for students with EBD (Kostewicz & Kubina, 2008). Although some students with EBD have strong reading skills, on average, the majority demonstrate significant deficits (Wanzek et al., 2014). Consistent with what Mrs. Moretta has noticed in Ms. Stevens's class, researchers have found that students

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with EBD tend to have consistently significantly weaker reading skills and, furthermore, demonstrate slower growth rates than students without disabilities (Wanzek et al., 2014). Thus, to improve their reading skills, highly effective interventions are needed (Brownell et al., 2012).

Unfortunately, researchers consistently find that the instructional challenges Ms. Moretta describes at Lincoln Elementary are common in dedicated settings for students with EBD, including both self-contained classes within neighborhood schools (like Ms. Stevens's class) and separate day schools. In these settings, reading instruction is often of low quality (Maggin et al., 2011; McKenna & Ciullo, 2016). Studies indicate that special educators in these settings seldom use research- or evidence-based reading and classroom management practices (Levy & Vaughn, 2002) and devote only about a third of their time to academic instruction (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010).

The purpose of this article is to provide administrators like Ms. Moretta with recommendations for how they can support special educators in providing high-quality reading instruction to students with EBD in dedicated settings. We first briefly describe key elements of strong reading instruction for students with EBD. We then explain how working conditions relate to instruction and how administrators can improve the demands and resources that support or constrain special educators' opportunities to learn and enact effective instructional practices so that reading instruction and student performance improve.

Key Elements of High-Quality Reading Instruction for Students With EBD

A classroom characterized by strong reading instruction for students with EBD is one in which students have daily opportunities to develop reading skills and instructional time is allocated specifically to reading (McKenna et al., 2019). In an effective reading environment, transitions between activities are efficient, with students spending little or no time waiting for instruction to begin or continue. Minimal instructional time is lost due to challenging behaviors and other activities (e.g., related services; earned free time) are scheduled at another time.

In effective classrooms, quality reading lessons are highly structured (McKenna et al., 2019). For example, teachers first verbally review a brief visual schedule (e.g., advance organizer or agenda) of activities to be completed during the session and remind students of reinforcement (e.g., points, brief break at the end of the lesson) that can be earned for effort and completing assigned tasks. As students complete activities, teachers check them off or erase them from the visual schedule.

During instruction, activities may progress from less demanding to more complex tasks which incorporate the research-based practice of behavioral momentum into the instructional process (Landrum et al., 2003). As an example, a teacher might follow a sequence of activities that begins with relevant letter–sound correspondence instruction before moving to word reading, vocabulary instruction and development of background knowledge, and narrative/expository text reading with support. In the preceding sequence, the teacher-supported text reading activities serve as an opportunity for students to practice and apply skills addressed earlier in the lesson within connected text.

High-quality reading instruction is also explicit, providing students with frequent opportunities to respond to and receive feedback on their learning (Garwood et al., 2017). In effective reading instruction environments, teachers limit the use of independent silent reading or round robin reading, as these structures reduce student accountability, opportunities for active engagement, and opportunities to receive feedback (Garwood et al., 2017). Effective specially designed instruction targets specific reading skills with which students struggle, in addition to providing students access to core grade-level curricular content. Furthermore, student interests and opportunities for choice are incorporated to promote student engagement (Ryan et al., 2008).

During instruction, teachers reinforce students at high rates for effort, on-task behavior, and task completion (McKenna & Bettini, 2018). For example, students may receive behavior-specific praise, tokens, or points toward a reward when they persist on difficult tasks, complete tasks, or engage in lesson activities (McKenna & Flower, 2014). Reinforcers need to be individualized and selected based on the items and privileges that are reinforcing to individual students (McKenna & Bettini, 2018). Individualized reinforcers can be identified for an individual student through completion of a preference assessment. Earned breaks may be particularly effective both to reinforce students and develop positive student–teacher relationships, which may be crucial to the success of reading interventions (McKenna et al., 2019).

Educators need to regularly collect data on students' reading performance to determine the degree to which students are benefiting from reading instruction (Hott et al., 2019) and inform the regrouping of students. Because challenging behaviors can adversely affect reading progress, special educators also need to collect data on behavioral progress through instruments such as direct behavior ratings (Chafouleas et al., 2012). Thus, it is recommended to include both academic and behavioral data collection as part of reading instructional practices. Academic data will help special educators determine whether the reading instruction itself needs further adjustment, while behavioral data will inform whether additional supports are needed to address student behavior that may be interfering with instruction. Furthermore, regular and ongoing analyses of both academic and behavioral data can help teachers make informed instructional decisions in a timely manner

Table 1. Opportunities to Learn and Enact Effective Reading Instructional Practices.

		***Opportunities to learn* effective reading instructional practices?**	
Do special educators have…		Yes	No
***Opportunities to Enact* Effective Reading Instructional Practices?**	Yes	**YY:** Special educators can develop the knowledge and skill to provide effective reading instruction, and they have the resources and time necessary to enact that knowledge in the service of students.	**YN:** Special educators may not be able to use their resources and instructional time effectively in the service of students. Skilled reading instruction is unlikely to occur.
	No	**NY:** Special educators may struggle to enact their knowledge to provide high-quality reading. Skilled reading instruction is unlikely to occur, and special educators are likely to experience frustration.	**NN:** Special educators have neither the knowledge nor the resources that they need to provide high-quality reading instruction. Skilled reading instruction is highly unlikely to occur.

(Kalberg et al., 2010). For example, for students who fail to make progress, these data could lead teachers to create a behavior intervention plan to improve behavior during reading instruction (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018) and/or seek out and enact supplemental, more intensive interventions for students (Kalberg et al., 2010).

Ideally, this is what Ms. Moretta would see when she walks through Ms. Stevens' classroom. Indeed, Ms. Stevens always has a caring, calm demeanor in her interactions with students, even when they present very challenging behavior. Ms. Stevens also praises students' positive behaviors often. Both teacher behaviors are noteworthy strengths that are essential for student success. However, Ms. Stevens expresses deep concerns about the quality of her own reading instruction. Ms. Stevens shares that her reading instruction is a "shizzle show . . . . I'm really struggling with [it]." Indeed, observations verify that reading instruction in Ms. Stevens' class is unstructured, with no clear objective or planned sequence of activities. Instruction proceeds at a slow pace, with limited opportunities for students to respond and little feedback tied to student responses. She often spends significant instructional time organizing and familiarizing herself with materials. Although there is a reinforcement system, reinforcement does not occur immediately and is not tightly tied to students' engagement in reading instruction. Data are seldom collected and rarely used to inform instructional decisions.

Given the kind of instruction described above, it makes sense that students are making insufficient academic progress. However, as we discuss in the next section, given the limited support that Ms. Stevens has for reading instruction, it is perhaps also unsurprising that reading instruction does not reflect the high-quality practices described previously. Ms. Stevens' working conditions limit her capacity to plan for and provide skilled instruction.

Administrators' Roles in Supporting Special Educators' Reading Instruction

Special educators, like Ms. Stevens, have a responsibility to provide high-quality reading instruction to students with EBD, but they often experience many barriers to fulfilling this responsibility, including poor working conditions (Bettini et al., 2017), high stress (Singh & Billingsley, 1996), and high burnout (Nelson et al., 2001), which collectively contribute to high teacher attrition (Gilmour & Wehby, 2019). However, administrators are in a position to address these challenges. Indeed, administrators are responsible for creating conditions that facilitate teachers' efforts to provide effective, research- or evidence-based reading instruction (Billingsley et al., 2019).

To understand how administrators can fulfill that responsibility, we draw on Bettini et al.'s (2016) conceptual framework, which is based on a limited but growing research base that articulates how working conditions shape special educators' *opportunities to learn* and *opportunities to enact* effective practices. Working conditions are the contexts of teachers' work, including the demands placed on them and the support they receive to meet those demands. Working conditions can be thought of as the manifestation of the school's organization in teachers' daily work life. For example, the master schedule shapes the adequacy of planning time, while the school's social organization (e.g., into teams) determines who teachers interact with during their work day. Thus, working conditions are a product of choices school leaders make about how to structure and coordinate the work of teachers.

As shown in Table 1 (adapted from Billingsley et al., 2019), when special educators' working conditions do not provide them with *opportunities to learn*, they may not be able to maximize their resources to provide skilled reading

instruction. Even when teacher preparation programs provide strong opportunities to learn effective practices, teachers require continuing opportunities to develop instructional skills throughout their careers, such as through professional development (PD) and through interactions with curricula and colleagues (Bettini et al., 2016). Conversely, when special educators' working conditions do not provide them with *opportunities to enact* effective practices, they may not be able to deploy their knowledge to provide strong instruction (Billingsley et al., 2019). Providing opportunities for teachers to enact effective practices may seem, on the surface, to be a simple matter of putting teachers in front of students. However, many factors can shape teachers' capacity to enact effective practices during their time with students, including the range of student needs in the group they are assigned to teach, the quality of their instructional resources, and their opportunities to plan for instruction (Billingsley et al., 2019).

In the following sections, we describe how administrators like Ms. Moretta can provide working conditions that support special educators' *opportunities to learn* and *enact* effective reading instructional practices. Based on Bettini et al.'s (2016) conceptual framework, we focus on (a) PD, (b) collaboration and collegial interactions, (c) curricula and material resources, (d) planning time, and (e) instructional grouping. A complete listing of the recommendations is provided in Table 2.

PD

Providing high-quality reading instruction requires sophisticated knowledge of reading, students' learning needs, effective instructional practices for teaching reading to students who struggle, and behavior management skills (Brownell et al., 2012). Formal, ongoing PD is one of the most common and effective methods that administrators like Ms. Moretta can provide to ensure teachers have *opportunities to learn* (Kennedy, 2016). Extensive research on PD indicates that it is more likely to promote changes in teachers' instruction if it (a) is of appropriate duration for the content, with more time dedicated to learning more complex practices (Kennedy, 2016); (b) is content-focused, providing teachers insights into how students learn in a particular content area; (c) involves collective participation with colleagues (Desimone, 2009); and (d) includes follow-up support, such as coaching (Brock & Carter, 2017) or performance feedback (Fallon et al., 2015) to help teachers integrate newly learned practices into their instruction.

Challenges to providing effective PD to special educators serving students with EBD. Providing effective PD to special educators serving students with EBD in dedicated settings poses several challenges. First, these teachers often teach multiple subjects to students in multiple grades (Bettini et al., 2017). Moreover, as noted earlier, these students are likely to have substantial skill gaps (Wanzek et al., 2014). As such, when PD is differentiated by grade level and content area, special educators may have multiple sessions they need to attend.

Second, some instructional practices for students with EBD are also recommended in general such as maximizing instructional time, while others are specific to students with behavior challenges, including building behavioral momentum (Landrum et al., 2003) and reinforcing student engagement (McKenna & Bettini, 2018). Thus, the latter practices are unlikely to be taught in school-wide PD. Similarly, explicit instruction is most effective for students

Table 2. Opportunities for Administrators to Support Special Educators' Use of Effective Reading Instructional Practices.

Conditions	Recommendations
PD	• Help special educators prioritize what PD options to attend; • Ensure follow-up coaching and/or performance feedback from someone with knowledge and skill in special education instructional practices and in the PD content; • Design some PD opportunities specifically for special educators serving students with EBD.
Collaboration and Collegial Interactions	• Provide and protect time for collaboration; • Establish a culture of collective responsibility for all students, including students with EBD.
Curricular Resources	• Ensure access to both general education curricula and to intervention curricula, in every subject and grade level for which a special educator is responsible, by: ○ Considering special educators' instructional needs when ordering curricula; ○ Facilitating access to previously ordered materials; ○ Provide a budget to support purchase of supplemental materials and student reinforcers.
Planning Time	• Ensure special educators have regularly scheduled planning time; • Protect regularly scheduled planning time by ensuring skilled student supervision during this time; • Reduce extra responsibilities.
Instructional Grouping	• To the extent possible, group students with shared instructional needs; • Help special educators problem solve how to address the diversity of student instructional needs in their classes.

Note. PD = professional development; EBD = emotional and behavioral disorders.

who struggle in reading, whereas implicit methods are more effective for students with age- or developmentally-appropriate skills (Connor et al., 2004). All told, teachers like Ms. Stevens may need additional PD, beyond that provided to other teachers. Exacerbating this issue, a special educator may be the only teacher in his or her school serving students with EBD due to the low proportion of students identified with EBD (Bettini et al., 2017). For example, Ms. Moretta's whole district has only one elementary, one middle, and two high-school special educators serving students with EBD in dedicated classes, leaving Ms. Stevens without a natural cohort with whom to engage in collective PD.

How can administrators support these special educators' PD? We recommend that administrators take three steps to increase the utility of PD for special educators serving students with EBD in dedicated settings. First, when multiple PD options are available, administrators can help special educators identify the option most useful for them. For example, if PD is provided to grade-level cohorts, Ms. Moretta could help Ms. Stevens determine which cohort to join, given her student needs and her own strengths and weaknesses.

Second, all teachers need follow-up support such as coaching (Brock & Carter, 2017) to help integrate PD content into their instruction. Follow-up support is likely to be most helpful, however, if it is delivered by personnel with strong knowledge of both PD content and the needs of students with EBD, as both knowledge bases are necessary to help special educators understand how to enact PD content. Thus, when identifying who will provide follow-up support to Ms. Stevens, Ms. Moretta should seek out PD providers who have both knowledge bases.

Third, administrators might consider creating some opportunities for special educators to participate in PD with colleagues who also serve students with EBD in dedicated settings. In schools with only one special educator in this role, as at Lincoln Elementary, this may require coordination across the district. These opportunities can focus on instructional practices (e.g., building behavioral momentum, reinforcing student engagement) that are unique to students with EBD.

Collaboration and Collegial Interactions

Formal and informal interactions with colleagues provide *opportunities to learn* (Billingsley et al., 2019). Through interactions with colleagues, teachers gain access to colleagues' knowledge and resources, and these interactions predict improvements in their instruction (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). Interactions with highly skilled colleagues may be especially important, as they provide teachers with access to more effective ways of instructing students and are associated with substantial improvements in effectiveness (Sun et al., 2017).

Challenges to collaboration for special educators serving students with EBD. Special educators in dedicated settings are often isolated from colleagues (O'Brien et al., 2019). In a recent national survey, special educators reported having instructional interactions with general education colleagues, on average, only 1–3 times/month; with special education colleagues, 1–2 times/week; and with learning specialists (e.g., reading coaches) less than once/month. Paraprofessionals were the only personnel with whom they reported daily instructional interactions (O'Brien et al., 2019). Although it is encouraging that special educators had someone with whom to talk about instruction, paraprofessionals typically have limited training (Giangreco et al., 2010), and interactions with them may not confer the benefits of interacting with skilled colleagues.

Few studies have examined why these special educators are isolated, but schedules may present barriers. While other teachers often eat lunch together, special educators serving students with EBD often report eating with students in order to ensure student safety and/or build relationships (Bettini et al., 2019). Planning periods are another opportunity for collegial interactions, but these special educators also report having limited planning time (O'Brien et al., 2019). Thus, teachers like Ms. Stevens often have limited time to interact with colleagues.

How can administrators support special educators' collaboration and collegial interactions? First, administrators can remove barriers to collegial interactions by ensuring special educators have scheduled time for collaboration with skilled colleagues. For example, if general educators have weekly collaborative planning periods, then Ms. Moretta can ensure special educators' schedules release them to participate in collaborative planning with highly skilled teachers who teach a grade Ms. Stevens teaches. Similarly, in schools using multi-tiered systems of support, reading specialists typically meet with teams to discuss student data and help teachers make data-informed instructional decisions (Fuchs et al., 2014). Administrators can ensure that special educators serving students with EBD are included in specialists' schedules. Because reading specialists typically have substantial pedagogical content knowledge, interacting with them may offer the benefits that come from interacting with more effective colleagues.

Second, teachers interact more with colleagues when their school has a culture of collective responsibility – that is, when teachers share the belief that they all share responsibility for all students (Bettini et al., 2018). Special educators tend to engage in more frequent collegial interactions focused on reading instruction in schools with a culture of shared responsibility for students with disabilities. Thus,

administrators such as Ms. Moretta can shape school culture by clearly communicating values and establishing expectations for how teachers should act and interact (Billingsley et al., 2014).

Curricula and Other Material Resources

Teachers use curricular resources to determine the scope and sequence of instructional content, as well as their teaching and assessment methods (Siuty et al., 2018). As such, curricular resources can provide teachers *opportunities to learn* about content, how students learn content, and effective instructional practices for teaching that content (Ball & Cohen, 1996). For example, reviewing effective curricula can prepare teachers to understand and pre-correct common misconceptions about content. Similarly, well-designed curricula can help teachers understand connections among units, thereby helping them create more coherent learning experiences for students (Davis & Krajcik, 2005). Curricular materials are also practical tools for instruction. Thus, teachers' meaningful use of curricular materials can facilitate teachers' *opportunities to enact* effective practices, as teachers often adopt practices embedded in curricular resources (Grossman & Thompson, 2008).

A growing body of research indicates that teachers become more effective at promoting strong student outcomes when they have strong curricula, such as lesson plans and logistical supports for using them (Jackson & Makarin, 2016). For example, Siuty et al. (2018) found that special educators without a reading intervention program tended to use an ad hoc array of materials, drawing on what was readily available and creating many materials themselves while not systematically collecting data to inform instructional decision making. These teachers' instruction "lacked a clear scope, sequence, and purpose, and did not resemble targeted and intensive intervention" (Siuty et al., 2018, p. 11). In contrast, teachers with curricula had to take data, which helped them learn about students' skills, and they had guidance about how to individualize instruction based on data. This led them to focus on the foundational skills (e.g., phonics) that other teachers neglected. Curricular materials can meaningfully shape the instruction special educators enact.

Challenges to providing curricular resources to special educators serving students with EBD. Special educators serving students with EBD often report having limited curricula (Albrecht et al., 2009). In a recent national survey, the majority of special educators in these settings reported having to find their own curricular resources (O'Brien et al., 2019). At Lincoln Elementary, for example, Ms. Stevens reported having no reading curricula. She relied on, "What is it, a Houghton Mifflin book?" that she "found . . . in the . . . copy room . . . I do create a lot of my own [materials] . . . a lot of Teacher Pay Teachers . . . Pinterest." She further shared, "that's kind of why [reading instruction is] hodge podge right now." Siuty et al.'s (2018) findings suggest this "hodge podge" is unlikely to resemble strong reading instruction. Furthermore, because these teachers often teach multiple grades, they likely require more curricular resources than other teachers—not less (Bettini et al., 2017).

How can administrators support these special educators' curricular resources? Students with EBD have a legal right to access general education reading curricula (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). And, they are often far behind grade level in reading, requiring interventions to address foundational skills (Wanzek et al., 2014). Thus, administrators can ensure special educators have high-quality curricular materials that both (a) support students to learn general education content and (b) address foundational skill gaps, such as those in decoding and fluency. In addition, administrators can provide assessment materials that help teachers identify reading skill strengths and deficits as well as monitor instructional and/or intervention effectiveness.

First, administrators can proactively include special educators in all curricular orders for the school as a whole. For example, when ordering new curricula, Ms. Moretta can purchase for Ms. Stevens a teacher's guide and student texts for each grade and content area that Ms. Stevens could be assigned to teach. Because Ms. Stevens can be assigned students in all elementary grades, K-5, the order should include a teacher's guide in every content area for all grades, K-5, as well as enough student materials for the maximum number of K-5 students who could be placed in her class. Ms. Stevens should also be included in PD focused on using new curricula.

Second, if curricular materials have already been ordered, administrators can ensure that special educators have access to these materials for all grades and subjects they teach. If they do not, administrators can help change that. Because these special educators tend to have limited planning time and be isolated in their schools (O'Brien et al., 2019), they may not have the time or social relationships to negotiate access to resources without administrators' involvement. For example, Ms. Moretta could assist Ms. Stevens in procuring curricula from storage closets or obtaining other teachers' extra texts.

Third, effective reading instruction for students with EBD requires additional materials, beyond what other teachers require. Specifically, incentive systems require teachers to maintain a menu of reinforcers, which should be individualized based on students' interests (Simonsen et al., 2015). Reinforcers are a core component of effective instruction for students with EBD, yet they are not free to teachers. Administrators, then, can purchase them with school funds so that teachers do not have to use their own financial resources. Furthermore, since students' motivations change,

funds should be available throughout the year so that teachers can change reinforcers in response to student change.

Planning Time

Planning time provides opportunities for teachers to examine goals, curricular materials, and student data, as they decide what and how to teach (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Thus, planning time may provide special educators *opportunities to enact* effective reading instruction (O'Brien et al., 2019). For example, in one study, teachers' ratings of the adequacy of planning time differentiated those who implemented recently learned research-based instructional practices with fidelity from those who did not (Allinder, 1996), indicating planning time may help special educators integrate newly learned practices into their instruction effectively. Consistent with this, special educators often report that having time to carefully plan contributes substantially to the quality of their instruction (Bettini et al., 2019). In contrast, special educators without adequate planning time sometimes report using instructional time for planning and paperwork, suggesting that providing more planning time could translate into more time for instruction (Bettini et al., 2015). In addition, researchers have consistently found that special educators' ratings of planning time are associated with their emotional exhaustion (a component of burnout that is related to instructional quality) and intent to continue teaching (Bettini et al., 2020). Thus, providing and protecting planning time for special educators may support effective reading instruction as well as have collateral benefits through prevention of teacher burnout and attrition.

Challenges to planning time for special educators serving students with EBD. Special educators consistently report having insufficient time for planning (Albrecht et al., 2009). For example, in a recent national survey, special educators in dedicated settings for students with EBD reported seldom having adequate time for planning and spending almost 10 hr per week planning outside school hours (O'Brien et al., 2019).

One challenge may be that special educators serving students with EBD in dedicated settings are often needed to ensure student safety during their planning time. For example, at Lincoln Elementary, Ms. Stevens shared,

> I just don't know . . . how it would be possible [for me to take planning time] without coming back to more fires . . . I wouldn't be able to focus . . . It's just getting some time where . . . I feel . . . the kids are safe . . . I obviously want a break during the day but it's more stressful . . .

Other special educators have echoed Ms. Stevens's concern that they cannot take planning time and ensure student safety unless there is strong supervision in place during their absence (Bettini et al., 2019).

Extra responsibilities may also limit planning time (Bettini et al., 2015). Special educators have extensive paperwork and supervision responsibilities (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010), which they report take time and attention away from planning instruction (DeMik, 2008). To complete these tasks, while also planning instruction across multiple grades and content areas, special educators like Ms. Stevens may require more planning time than other educators (Bettini et al., 2017).

How can administrators support these special educators' planning time? First, administrators can create or modify master schedules to ensure special educators have daily planning time—at least as much time as other educators in the school. Second, to protect this time, administrators must ensure students are supervised by personnel with strong training in classroom and behavior management, as well as specific training in students' behavior plans. For example, Ms. Moretta could construct Lincoln's master schedule such that another highly skilled special educator provides instruction one period per day, freeing Ms. Stevens to spend this time planning. Third, administrators should consider reducing extra responsibilities (e.g., scheduling individualized education program meetings; bus duty) so that special educators can use planning time to plan for instruction (Bettini et al., 2019). For example, Ms. Moretta could reassign responsibilities that do not require specialized expertise to classified staff.

Assigned Instructional Groups

Assigned instructional groups shape special educators' *opportunities to enact* effective instructional practices (Billingsley et al., 2019). In particular, special educators can provide more effective intensive instruction when they teach small groups of students with shared instructional needs (Russ et al., 2001). For example, reading interventions in Grades K-3 are consistently more effective with smaller groups (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007). Smaller, more homogeneous groups help special educators provide students with practice opportunities that are tightly aligned with their learning needs and more frequent feedback on their learning (Vaughn et al., 2012). Thus, researchers recommend structuring reading instruction so that students with the most significant reading difficulties receive reading instruction in small groups of two to four students (Vaughn et al., 2012).

Challenges to appropriate instructional grouping for special educators serving students with EBD. Special educators serving students with EBD in dedicated classes teach an average of 9–10 students (O'Brien et al., 2019). These special educators report that their students do not have similar instructional needs and that they teach students from multiple grades (three, on average). As such, they report that it is not

manageable to deliver instruction that meets all students' needs in one lesson (O'Brien et al., 2019). One challenge to more appropriate instructional groups may be the small number of students with EBD who require dedicated programming. For example, Lincoln Elementary's district has only six elementary students who require this level of service. The district does not have the critical mass to warrant creating multiple classes and separating students by grade.

How can administrators support these special educators' instructional groups? Some districts may have enough students to justify multiple dedicated classes for students with EBD. In these cases, administrators might consider collaborating with special educators to develop schedules that are informed by students' reading data, so that special educators have opportunities to provide reading instruction to small groups of students with shared reading needs, as recommended (Vaughn et al., 2012).

In districts without enough students to justify multiple classes, administrators can actively problem solve, in collaboration with teachers, to determine how to support small group reading instruction for students with EBD. Administrators may be able to use other resources to support small homogeneous groups. For example, at Lincoln Elementary, Ms. Moretta was exploring the possibility of having another special educator teach some reading instruction in Ms. Stevens's class, which would allow Ms. Stevens and the other teacher to divide up students for targeted reading instruction.

Conclusion

Reading proficiency is crucial to success for students with EBD (Ciullo et al., 2016). School personnel have a legal obligation to provide "more than de minimis" benefit to students to ensure that students actually make progress given their educational needs (Yell & Bateman, 2017). Special educators are responsible for providing high-quality, intensive reading instruction to students with EBD in dedicated settings (IDEIA, 2004), and administrators are responsible for ensuring special educators have opportunities to learn and enact effective reading practices (Billingsley et al., 2014). Administrators can fulfill this responsibility by leveraging special educators' working conditions as a means to support them in their work.

After learning about the importance of working conditions in supporting special educators in their work with students with EBD in dedicated settings, Ms. Moretta gained a better understanding of why her students might be struggling in reading and why Ms. Stevens decided to quit teaching. Ms. Moretta is determined to better support Ms. Stevens's replacement, Ms. Jones, the following year, by thoughtfully providing conditions that support Ms. Jones's instruction.

As she plans for next year, Ms. Moretta should consider designing the master schedule to proactively address the needs of the students and teacher in the dedicated classroom. She can specifically ensure Ms. Jones has (a) consistent time to plan, while students are supervised by someone with strong relevant skills; (b) dedicated time allocated for collaboration and collegial interactions, especially with skilled colleagues, focused on reading instruction; and (c) the personnel resources necessary to divide her students up for reading instruction, so that she can provide targeted, intensive instruction. She can also begin gathering curricular resources, ensuring Ms. Jones walks into a classroom that is well-stocked with all of the curricula necessary for providing high-quality and targeted reading instruction across grade levels, so that Ms. Jones does not have to rely on the "hodge podge" of materials that Ms. Stevens relied on. Ms. Moretta can also carefully plan for Ms. Jones's PD, identifying PD opportunities focused on strong reading instruction, and PD providers with relevant expertise in both reading instruction and supporting students with EBD. Finally, when reflecting on her supports for Ms. Stevens, Ms. Moretta shared that she planned, in future, to "meet with the teacher . . . weekly" so that she would have a better sense of "what was actually going on . . ." in the classroom. She shared that a meeting would provide an opportunity for the teacher to raise "concerns and needs." By meeting weekly, Ms. Moretta would have an opportunity to evaluate to what extent Ms. Jones had adequate opportunities to learn and enact effective reading instructional practices for her students with EBD.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. This vignette represents real experiences of participants in an ongoing research study, which was approved by Boston University's IRB office. All examples and quotes from Lincoln Elementary are real, but proper nouns (e.g., school name, principal and teacher name) have been replaced by pseudonyms. This research was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R324B170017 to Boston University (PI: Elizabeth Bettini). The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

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