

Administrative Support and Provisionally-Licensed Special Education Teachers: Examining Support Dimensions During a Global Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to report on the perspectives of provisionally-licensed special education teachers as to the administrative support they experienced and felt they needed in a distance learning environment. Utilizing a three-step convenience sampling process, five provisionally-licensed special education teachers who attended a Mid-Atlantic university participated in the study and described their perspectives of administrative support. Utilizing House's (1981) theory of social support as a conceptual framework, data was collected through participant journal entries and semi-structured interviews and analyzed through a multi-step coding process. Findings revealed that provisionally-licensed special education teachers require support across all of House's (1981) dimensions including instrumental support, informational support, emotional support, and appraisal support. Findings include four main takeaways: (a) provisionally-licensed special education teachers require supports across dimensions, most importantly, emotional support; (b) provisionally-licensed special education teachers reported a need for school-based administrators to establish open communication to inform special education teacher roles, establish expectations of collaboration, and demonstrate care and support; (c) school-based administrators who possess a background in special education were reported to possess knowledge and skills to support special education teachers and students with disabilities; and (d) support provided to provisionally-licensed special education teachers did not always align to needed support. Recommendations for administrative support approaches for provisionally-licensed special education teachers are described and limitations and implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: administrative support, COVID-19 pandemic, provisionally-licensed special education teachers, qualitative phenomenological study

1. Introduction

In the United States, 49 states including the District of Columbia, report shortages in special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2021), accounting for 98% of the nation's school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). As special education teacher attrition is increasing, the number of students with disabilities continues to rise, exacerbating the need for qualified teachers (National Education Association, 2019). To address this need and combat shortages across the country, federal legislation, namely Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), provides states the autonomy to determine teacher certification requirements and alternatives to traditional teacher preparation. With this, states and school divisions have been implementing emergency provisional licensure at ever increasing rates, especially in the area of special education, to fill the critical shortage areas (Nougaret et al., 2005).

Provisionally-Licensed Special Educators

A provisional license in the state of Virginia, by definition, is a nonrenewable license valid for a maximum of three years and is issued to an individual who has minimal competency gaps for full licensure that is set by the state's department of education (University of Richmond, 2022). Although requirements vary between states, in order for an individual to obtain a provisional license in special education, there are a basic set of requirements that must be satisfied. For example, in the state of Virginia, an individual must: (a) be employed by a public or non-public school, (b) hold a baccalaureate degree from an accredited college or university, (c) have an assigned school mentor endorsed in special education, (d) have a planned program of study in special education and (e) have completed three to six semester hours in the core competencies of special education (Virginia Beach City Public Schools, 2022). During the three probationary years, the individual must

complete all requirements for the special education endorsement area, complete necessary professional studies requirements, and meet prescribed Virginia's professional teaching assessments as defined by the Board of Education. By depending on provisionally-licensed teachers, school divisions have been able to fill gaps in critical shortage areas and continue to deliver necessary special education services to students with disabilities.

The large scale hiring of provisionally-licensed special education teachers have raised concerns regarding the effectiveness of these teachers (Nougaret et al., 2005). Due to the lack of necessary knowledge and skills that are essential to support students with disabilities (Hagaman & Casey, 2018), provisionally-licensed special education teachers may negatively impact school functioning by: (a) ineffective collaborative partnerships with general education teachers, instructional staff, and related service providers (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008); (b) ineffective instructional practices (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008); and (c) poor outcomes for students with disabilities (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Due to their limited knowledge and skills, provisionally-licensed special education teachers require more intensive support from school staff, specifically school-based administrators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Additionally, provisionally-licensed teachers have not only navigated entering the teaching profession underprepared and underqualified, but have been faced with a global COVID-19 pandemic, shifting the educational landscape to distance learning. This rapid shift to online learning compounds the difficulties for instruction (Garcia & Weiss, 2020) and adds to the need for significant support for provisionally-licensed teachers.

Administrative Support

Administrative support has been cited as a critical factor for fostering positive and manageable working conditions for special education teachers to fulfil their roles and responsibilities and provide appropriate services to students with disabilities (Albrecht et al., 2009; Billingsley, 2004; Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011). The complex relationship between school-based administrators and provisionally-licensed special education teachers, specifically around support, is grounded in organizational support theory (OST), which explains the relationships between employers and employees based upon social exchanges (Baran et al., 2012). Within this theory a central tenant is perceived organizational support (POS), which refers to the degree to which employees believe that their work and contributions are valued and cared about by their employers (Baran et al., 2012; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Further, POS includes supervisor support, which influences specific consequences or outcomes, such as organizational commitment, performance, and job-related affect. Therefore, if employees who perceive OST, they feel obligated to reciprocate toward the organization and enhance positive affective reactions.

School-based administrators who are perceived as supportive possess leadership approaches that foster collaboration, allow teachers to participate in decision-making processes (Hulpia et al., 2009), and are grounded in distributed leadership (Devos et al., 2014). These characteristics are associated with an increase of job commitment from teachers (McMahon et al., 2017). Additionally, perceived authenticity of school-based administrators is associated with increased trust in the school administration, highlighting the value of relationship-building within the school (Fox et al., 2015; McMahon et al., 2017). School-based administrators who create positive school climates by reinforcing procedures, expectations, discipline, and establishing inclusive environments are better equipped to promote safe environments within the school community (Albrecht et al., 2009; Astor et al., 2009). School environments that report teachers feeling supported are associated with greater well-being, commitment, job satisfaction, and efficacy, leading to retention (Albrecht et al., 2009; Ansley et al., 2019; Cancio et al., 2013; Conley & You, 2017; Hughes et al., 2015). Conversely, prior research indicates that a lack of administrative support influences special education teachers' decision to leave the field (Billingsley, 2004; Hirsch, 2005; Prather-Jones, 2011). Excessive work problems and lack of administrative support have been reported to increase stress and burnout, lower job satisfaction, and reduce professional commitment (Albrecht et al., 2009; Bettini et al., 2020; Billingsley et al., 2004; Conley & You, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2017; Kaff, 2004; Schlitche et al., 2005). Lack of support from school-based administration was an influential factor to teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Although OST includes the construct of support, it does not specify specific dimensions or constructs within support. Therefore, this study utilized House's (1981) theory of social support, due to a more focused inquiry into the construct of administrative support (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Cancio et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2015; Litrell et al., 1994). House (1981) identified four distinct behavioral areas of support including (a) instrumental support, (b) informational support, (c) emotional support, and (d) appraisal support. In a systematic review of administrative support of special education teachers, Macedonia et al. (2021) found that the four dimensions of support influenced education teachers' affective reactions (i.e., job satisfaction, commitment, self-efficacy), which impacted special education teacher retention (Albrecht et al., 2009; Ansley et al., 2019; Cancio et al., 2013; Conley and You, 2017; Hughes et al., 2015). However, within the included studies in the review, none included provisionally-licensed special education teachers. Therefore, extended exploration is needed in defining administrative support and determining what administrative support is required of provisionally-licensed special education teachers. The purpose of this study was to examine the received and desired administrative support described by special educators in a distance learning environment. Specifically, the research

questions addressed in this study included:

1. Who do provisionally-licensed special education teachers look toward for support?
2. How do provisionally-licensed special education teachers define the roles and responsibilities of school-based administrators during distance learning?
3. What are the social supports that provisionally-licensed special education teachers describe as receiving and how did provisionally-licensed special education teachers judge the support that they received?
4. What are the social supports that provisionally-licensed special education teachers describe as wanting to receive?

2. Methods

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the aforementioned research questions. Phenomenological research is best suited to explore the common or shared lived experiences of several individuals (Creswell, 2007, 2014). For the purposes of this study, the focus was to gain a deeper understanding of provisionally-licensed special education teachers' perspectives of the administrative supports provided and needed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1 Participant Selection

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval for the study, the researchers used a three-step convenience sampling process to recruit participants for the study (Maxwell, 2005). First, the first author identified the graduate level special education courses being offered for provisionally-licensed teachers in fall 2020 at one university-based Cohort and Master's degree program in Special Education in a Mid-Atlantic state. Courses at the midpoint of the program were identified in order to recruit participants who had similar experiences in the preparation program and in the schools. There were two sections of the courses identified as Adapted Instructional Methods and Transition for Secondary Learners and Elementary Reading, Curriculum, and Strategies for Students Who Access the General Education Curriculum offered. Second, the first author contacted the instructors of these courses to request an opportunity to recruit potential participants. The email request explained the intent of the study and requested ten minutes of class time to provide an overview of the study, to review the Informed Consent form, and answer any questions regarding the study. Third, once permitted, the first author presented this information to one section of each course. Interested teacher candidates were given one week to return the completed Informed Consent form via email to the first author. Five teacher candidates of special education agreed to participate in the study.

2.2 Participants

All five participants were provisionally-licensed special education teachers in their first three years of teaching in three local, large suburban school districts. In the state in which these participants were employed, individuals with a bachelor's degree in any area may be granted provisional licenses to teach in special education after taking a three-credit hour introduction to special education course (*citation withheld to protect anonymity*). The individual then has up to 2.5 years to complete the coursework and experiences necessary to earn a professional teaching license. Each participant was in full time teaching positions while they took coursework. The preparation was delivered in a cohort model through a university with class sessions held at centrally-located schools within the local school division. Four of the five participants were White/Caucasian (80%), identified as female (80%), and taught in self-contained settings (80%). Three participants (60%) worked in a public elementary school setting; two participants (40%) worked in public high schools. The nature of disability category service varied widely. See Table 1 for participant demographic information.

2.3 Data Sources

The researchers utilized multiple data sources including: (a) demographics survey via Qualtrics, (b) three journal entries, and (c) a semi-structured interview with each participant.

2.3.1 Demographics Survey

Once consent was received, researchers sent participants a link to an electronic Qualtrics demographics survey through their university-based email address. Questions included gender, race/ethnicity, total years teaching, grade level(s) taught, primary service delivery model, disability category serviced, and the learning scenario at the school during the 2020-2021 school year (i.e. in-person learning, virtual learning, hybrid learning, co-current learning).

2.3.2 Journals

Participants were asked to complete three journal entries; one journal entry each for the months of November, December, and January. Directions for the journal entries were as follows: (1) For each prompt in each journal, please respond in detail. You may include specific details of your experiences and (2) Submit by the highlighted date. For the journals, each participant was provided access to an individualized, university-based One Drive folder that housed the sharable journal file for each month in addition to the study timeline. In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, only the

participant and the research team had access to the folder. The study timeline provided participants

Table 1. Demographic information of participants

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Years Teaching	Grade Level Taught	Primary Service Delivery	Disability Category Served
Michelle	Female	Caucasian or White	3	Elementary (Grades 1-5)	Self-Contained	Deaf-blindness, Developmental Delay, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Other Health Impairment
Arielle	Female	Caucasian or White	2	Elementary (Grades 3-5)	Self-Contained	Autism
Sasha	Female	Caucasian or White	2	Elementary (Grades 3-4)	Self-Contained	Autism, Emotional Disturbance, Other Health Impairment
Andrew	Male	Caucasian or White	2	High School (Grade 10)	Resource/ Self-Contained/ Inclusion	Specific Learning Disability
Karina	Female	Asian	2	High School (Grades 9-12)	Self-Contained	Autism

with the specific information about when journals would become available and when journals would need to be completed. For example, Journal 1 was available on November 9th in each One Drive folder and it was due to be completed the following Monday, November 16th. The first author also sent each participant an email when the journal was available on One Drive and provided a reminder of the due date. If participants did not complete the journal by the due date, the first author provided an email reminder to complete it as soon as possible.

2.3.3 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with each participant occurred during the last phase of data collection, following the completion of participant journals. The diary or journal-interview method, which combines participant solicited journals and follow-up interviews, was utilized to approximate participant observation (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005; Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977). The semi-structured interviews served as a method to understand participant perspectives regarding their experiences of support as special education teachers. As Patton (2015) explains, “we interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe... we cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions” (p. 426).

For the safety of participants and the research team during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews took place via Zoom in a private university office, with a noise cancelling machine placed outside the door to ensure participant privacy. On average, interviews lasted approximately 55 minutes. The first author began each interview by explaining the purpose of the study, associated benefits/risks, and measures of confidentiality. The research team used a semi-structured interview protocol to conduct each interview. Protocols across all interviews included questions related to participants: (a) perspectives of the term support (e.g., “Can you describe what ‘support’ means to you as a special education teacher?”); (b) experiences of support prior to the pandemic (e.g., “Describe what supports were most valuable to you in the school building.”) and (c) experiences of administrative support during the pandemic and hopes for the future (e.g., “Describe

how you have been supported by your school-based administrator(s) during distance learning”). The first author transcribed each interview after all interviews were completed.

3. Data Analysis

Both authors completed data analysis and served as the analysis team. Each author had experience teaching students with disabilities and the first author had experience supervising special education teachers as a school-based administrator. The analysis team first developed a priori codes to be utilized within analysis and then developed a codebook that included categories, codes, descriptions, and examples. The first author was assigned the primary responsibility as “codebook editor” during the study (Saldaña, 2016). The second author provided input regarding updates and adjustments to coding and the revision of the codebook.

3.1 Developing A Priori Codes

House’s (1981) theory of social support was utilized as a conceptual framework for this study and enabled an analysis that directly addressed the purpose and research questions (Saldaña, 2016). Therefore, a provisional list of codes was determined before coding in order to compliment House’s (1981) conceptual framework as well as the research questions and goals. These codes fell into five basic categories: (a) school-based administrators; (b) roles and responsibilities; (c) providers of support; (d) types of support provided and needed; and (e) value of the support received.

First, the research team created codes for the potential school-based administrators that participants could reference. Thus, the codes *principal* and *assistant principal* were created a priori. The code *central office administration* was added during analysis as it was referenced by participants. Second, to address the research question regarding the roles and responsibilities of school-based administrators, the research team used codes that directly correlated to components of school-based leadership according to the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) and Professional Standards for Education Leaders, formally known as Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (ISLLC). The codes were *managerial*, *instructional*, *student matters*, *school finance*, and *human resources*. Third, the codes for providers of support (POS) were created. These codes were initiated by current literature of school-based personnel who are reported to provide special education teachers support within their roles. The codes within POS included: *principal provider (PP)*, *assistant principal provider (APP)*, *department chair provider (DCP)/lead teacher provider (LTP)*, *mentor provider (MP)*, and *colleague(s) provider (CP)*. Fourth, to address the questions related to type of support provided and wanted, the research team utilized House’s (1981) four dimensions of administrative support as the codes that included: *instrumental support (INSTS)*, *informational support (INFS)*, *emotional support (ES)*, and *appraisal support (AS)*. Lastly, to address the research question that elicited participants to judge the support they received, the research team created provisional codes that could be used to assign value. These codes included *important*, *not important*, *helpful*, *not helpful*, *valuable*, and *not valuable*. The codes *not learning from the support* and *no support* were added to the codebook during data analysis.

After identifying and defining a priori codes, the research team then assigned categories to each group of provisional codes that were formulated. The categories that were established for the five groups of codes included: (a) *who is an administrator?* (b) *roles and responsibilities of school-based administrators*; (c) *provider of support*; (d) *type of support being provided or needed*; and (e) *value of support*.

3.2 Inter-rater Reliability within Coding

Following the development of the a priori categories and codes, the first author transferred three journal entries into a single Microsoft Word document per each participant. Each document was de-identified prior to the analysis in order to protect confidentiality of participants. Next, the research team independently coded one participant journal at the category level. Then, the research team compared their coding and discussed discrepancies until consensus was reached. The codebook was further refined to include these decisions.

3.3 Analysis Process

Once inter-rater reliability of coding was established, the second author began the analysis by reading through each journal and hand-coding each journal entry by evidence of a category without differentiation by code. For example, the second author would highlight all references made to support provided in pink and highlight all references made to support needed in aqua. The second phase of analysis involved the first author applying the code within the category using the a priori codes. If there were specific words or phrases that did not necessarily fit with the codes, that was noted in the codebook and the first author revised the codebook accordingly. Once there were categories, codes, and descriptions that reflected the data analysis procedures in the codebook, the first author added examples that best depicted the categories/codes. For example, the following excerpt was provided within the providers of support (POS) or non-support category, “I don’t feel like I have received a lot of support from my admin in the past few months, but definitely more from my lead teacher.” This excerpt demonstrates the direct reference to support provided (and not provided) by specific individuals, which in this case, is the administration and lead teacher.

The journal entries of participants were analyzed prior to the transcripts. The research team utilized the journal entries to establish the interview protocol and/or referenced specific quotes or themes within the journals with specific participants to elicit additional perspectives and detail during the interviews. The interviews were transcribed by the first author. The first author read through each transcript while listening to the audio recordings to ensure the transcripts were accurate (Creswell, 2009). Next, the research team engaged in the two-step coding process that was identical to the journal entries using the finalized codebook. Throughout the data analysis process, the research team reached theoretical saturation and were able to see patterns consistent across participants. No new information was identified as additional participants' data was analyzed.

3.4 Trustworthiness

The research team sought to ensure trustworthiness of the analysis (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009) in the following ways: (a) comparing transcriptions to original recordings to ensure accuracy; (b) taking a team approach to data analysis; (c) member checking of interview transcripts and reviewing of themes; and (d) engaging in weekly meetings as a research team to review and discuss interpretations of data and findings and discuss any research bias in data analysis. The first author sent a concept map of synthesized data via email to participants and requested that participants respond to express how the data captured their experiences of support or to express what they would change to better represent the findings (Birt et al., 2016). Three participants responded in agreement with the research findings and did not make any recommendations or suggestions to the findings.

4. Results

4.1 Who Do Provisionally-Licensed Special Education Teachers Look Toward Support?

Provisionally-licensed special education teachers identified multiple sources of support within their roles. Four of the participants felt that the school-based administration, the principal and/or assistant principal(s), was instrumental in providing support during the distance learning environment. The participants described the support that they received from school administration as *'above and beyond,' 'helpful,'* and the *'most valuable'* source of support for special education teachers.

Four participants specifically named the principal as the individual they looked to for support, guidance, and comfort. As one participant shared, *"I must say that the support and guidance provided by our school administrators, especially our school principal, was not only pertinent, but also needed... his constant support was truly needed to maintain sanity and to make light of the situation."* Participants described specific characteristics of their school principal, which included attributes such as *'compassionate,' 'informative,' 'thoughtful,' 'respectful,' 'accessible,' 'amazing,'* and *'considerate.'* Participants shared they felt that school-based administration, specifically the principal, demonstrated support by specific behaviors such as willingness to listen to staff, responsiveness to students, staff, and community, quick initiative to communicate with teachers and stakeholders, following through on responsibilities or staff requests, and ensuring that the holistic needs of staff and students (i.e. physical, emotional, mental) were met.

Assistant principals were also named by four participants as being an important source of support during distance learning. Participants described assistant principals as *'knowledgeable,' 'responsive,' 'positive,' 'eager,' 'willing to listen,'* and *'confident.'* Like principals, assistant principals were described as going *'above and beyond'* by providing whatever support was needed to special education teachers as well as asking about progress or specific needs. Three participants described their assistant principals as being easily accessible and responsive *'24/7'* by answering questions, providing guidance, or a trusted individual to confide in if teachers felt overwhelmed.

All five participants discussed colleagues as instrumental in providing support during distance learning. Collegial support included: (a) professional learning communities (PLCs) or collaborative learning teams (CLTs), (b) special education teachers or co-teachers, and/or (c) teaching assistants (TAs). Two participants specifically discussed the importance of professional learning communities and collaborative learning teams. As one participant shared, *"My PLC has been important to me. It is great to be able to communicate with teachers with similar students."* This specific special education teacher voiced the importance of collaborating and communicating with special education teachers who also taught students with intellectual disabilities or multiple disabilities, which made her feel connected and less isolated. Another participant stated, *"A lot of support comes from the CLTs- it's a way for us to make sure we are all on the same page."*

Special education mentors were an additional source of support for three participants. Participants shared that their mentors were fellow special education teachers in their department. One participant shared that although her assigned mentor was within special education, they varied within service delivery, which impacted the type of support she was able to receive. This participant shared that although the support was generally helpful, a mentor serving the same type of students would have been more beneficial. However, all three participants described their mentor as *'helpful'* and that relationships have been maintained following the termination of the official mentorship relationship. Additionally, the mentors were seen as trusted individuals who the special education teachers felt safe confiding in. As one participant

shared, “*she would be someone I could go to when I would get overwhelmed- she would say, “you’re doing a great job, you’re amazing,” and it was really nice to hear it.*”

4.2 How Do Provisionally-Licensed Special Education Teachers Define the Roles and Responsibilities of School-Based Administrators During Distance Learning?

Participants consistently emphasized roles and responsibilities that fell within four main domains, including: (a) managerial, (b) instructional, (c) student matters, and (d) human resources.

4.2.1 Managerial Responsibilities

Participants described managerial responsibilities of school-based administrators as: (a) establishing master and school schedules; (b) oversight of scheduling meetings (i.e. staff, department, PLC/CLT); (c) Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings; (d) attending meetings and actively participating; and (e) establishing timelines and expectations of teacher related responsibilities. Additionally, participants discussed that school-based administrators had responsibilities across multiple grade levels and departments. As one participant stated, “*My AP is in charge of special education and runs all of the IEP meetings. She is also responsible for K-2.*”

4.2.2 Instructional Programming

Participants reinforced the importance of instructional programming within the school-based administrator roles and responsibilities. Two notable findings emerged from the responses which included the oversight of the instructional programs for students and the professional growth of special education teachers. For overseeing instructional programming, participants stated that responsibilities included resources, instruction, progress monitoring, and intervention. School-based administrators were described as being critical in providing adequate instructional resources to students. One teacher stated, “*the other APs have engaged in projects such as ensuring that students receive a laptop, materials, and books before the start of school.*” Additionally, school-based administrators were described by participants as overseeing the instructional programming and individualized supports for students. One participant noted that her principal required the special education teachers to “*make weekly choice boards for our students, keep individual school webpages updated, and report on involvement from students.*” Other school-based administrators were named as being responsible for the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) process and the responsibilities associated within that role including: (a) oversight of student progress across interventions, (b) identifying students for interventions, and (c) referring students to Child Study if students were not making adequate progress.

The second theme was professional growth of special education teachers, specifically teacher evaluation. Some participants described teacher evaluation as ‘*checking the box,*’ whereas one participant described the evaluation as, ‘*comprehensive and forward looking in response to staff professional development.*’ As part of the teacher evaluation cycle, all participants stated their school-based administrator conducted a minimum of one formal observation a semester, in which feedback varied from ‘*basic*’ and ‘*general*’ to specific feedback and follow up tasks to build capacity (i.e. observe other teachers, record themselves teach and write notes, read a specific book tailored to instruction). Four of the participants noted that their school-based administrators had a background in special education, which meant they could provide specific feedback related to their role as a special education teacher. Three participants indicated that their school-based administrators recommended professional development that was specific to their needs as teachers or to the individualized needs of their students. One participant stated, “*my admin is very helpful in notifying us regarding any trainings or professional development that she feels might be beneficial for us becoming better teachers.*” Two other participants stated that they took initiative to find available professional development, but received encouragement and support from their school-based administrators to take the time off to complete it.

4.2.3 Student Matters and Human Resources

Only one participant directly referenced school-based administration overseeing student matters including discipline, student concerns, and family partnerships related to individual students. The participant indicated that the support he received from his assistant principal was valuable due to the level of responsiveness, initiative, and care that she demonstrated. Four participants indicated overall positive experiences with their school-based administrators, whereas one consistently reported negative experiences.

4.3 What Are the Supports That Provisionally-Licensed Special Education Teachers Describe as Receiving, How Did Provisionally-Licensed Special Education Teachers Judge the Support That They Received, and What Are the Supports That Provisionally-Licensed Special Education Teachers Describe as Wanting to Receive?

Provisionally-licensed special education teachers discussed both provided and needed administrative support and the value they placed on it. Figure 1 includes the dimensions of administrative support provided and the components related to each dimension. The numerical values indicate how many times a specific component within the dimension was discussed by participants. Items in red circles are supports identified by participants as most important.

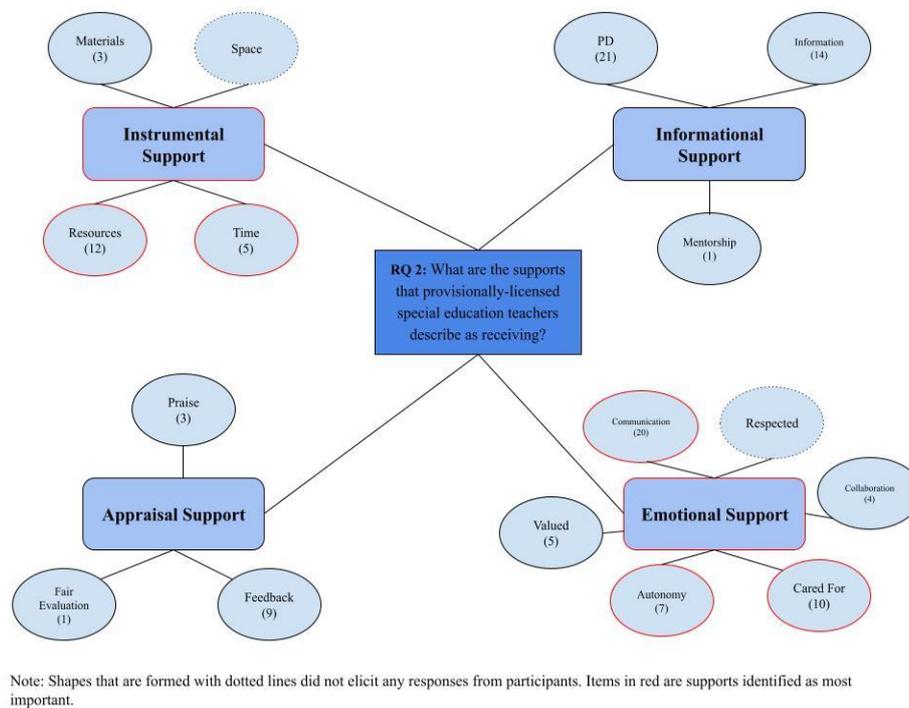


Figure 1. Conceptual map of provided administrative support across dimensions

4.3.1 Emotional Support

4.3.1.1 Provided Emotional Support

Emotional support was identified by all participants as the most important type of support provided during distance learning. Communication was the component that was discussed most frequently by participants. Communication was described as being provided by either the special education department lead or chair or by the school-based administration. Regardless of who was providing the communication, it usually came through email or phone call. However, there were contrasts between the purposes of the provided communication. Participants reported the purpose of communication via special education department was related specifically to their shared roles and responsibilities as special education teachers. Participants shared that communication allowed for them to ‘*check in*’ with members of their team, ‘*share resources*,’ ‘*ask and answer questions*,’ as well as to ‘*notify teachers of pertinent professional development*.’

Participants described communication provided by school-based administration to provide staff and students an outlet to ‘*check in*’ to see if they needed anything, provide a safe space to ‘*share questions or concerns*,’ ‘*report on the updates regarding distance learning*,’ and ‘*share opportunities for professional development*’ provided to the whole staff. Participants expressed that communication coming from school-based administration was ‘*very, very open*’ and that communication would go out ‘*daily*’ for special education teachers and staff to know exactly what was happening. Conversely, one participant shared that “*in addition to lack of administrative support, communication has decreased significantly*.”

Participants described the positive influence of feeling cared for and being provided autonomy and control over instructional decisions from their school-based administrators. For example, one participant stated that the principal said, “*I expect you to do your best. But I also know that this is a tough adjustment for everyone, I’m here. He just set the tone... at a personal level*.” Other participants described alternative ways that school-based administrators demonstrated care with actions such as ‘*taking the training with us*,’ ‘*making a point to pop into my classroom to say hello*,’ and even ‘*letting in-person teachers leave early during my planning time*.’ Three teachers specifically noted feeling that their school-based administrators ‘*trusted*’ their judgement and decision-making ability as special education teachers.

Two other supports that were expressed by provisionally-licensed special education teachers were collaboration and feeling valued by their school-based administration. Participants discussed collaboration as an element of emotional support due to contributing to a nurturing and caring culture. Fostering a community where special education teachers shared resources, a space to reflect on successes and failures, and eliciting feedback from others provided a collaborative

atmosphere. Additionally, participants discussed the importance of feeling recognized by their school-based administrators for the work that they do in the classroom. Participants specifically voiced how impactful feeling ‘*appreciation*’ and ‘*validation*’ by their school-based administrators was and in turn, made them feel more satisfaction and motivation in their work.

4.3.1.2 Needed Emotional Support

Within the domain of emotional support, the component of communication permeated across both interviews and journal entries as an aspect of emotional support that was needed by provisionally-licensed special education teachers. Although some participants had shared that communication was ‘*open*,’ three participants described communication as ‘*unclear*,’ ‘*limited*’ and ‘*confusing*.’ Prior to COVID-19, communication was able to occur more naturally and in passing, whereas participants described communication as needing to be set up through either Zoom or a phone call. One participant stated, “*I definitely need more communication, I need the lines of communication to be open and safe.*” Additionally, participants shared that not only informational communication was needed related to school functioning, but also informal to check in and see how teachers were doing.

Participants described additional components within emotional support that were needed within their roles including: (a) the need for collaboration, (b) to feel cared for and valued, and (c) to have autonomy over decision-making. Participants shared the need for administrative support within building collaborative partnerships with team members. One participant stated, “*some of them (general education teachers) are not willing to collaborate.*” Additionally, participants voiced the need to also be provided opportunities to co-plan with general education teachers in order to optimize instruction in the classroom. Some participants described not feeling cared for or valued for teaching in person while many co-workers were able to teach from their homes. As one participant described,

“even though I am grateful to be able to teach in person and attend to my students’ needs, it is sometimes hard not to feel invisible...but during faculty meeting and board meetings... they are focused on all the virtual general education and special education teachers.”

Participants voiced the need to feel appreciated for efforts, but also a part of the decision-making processes in terms of caseloads, instruction, and schedules. These processes were seen as vital within their day to day roles, and therefore, participants advocated for ownership, autonomy, and control.

4.3.2 Instrumental Support

4.3.2.1 Provided Instrumental Support

Instrumental support was the second dimension identified as most important for provisionally-licensed special education teachers. Participants described the importance of receiving adequate resources, time, and materials in order to fulfil their roles and responsibilities as special education teachers. Being provided resources was cited the most, which varied from program licenses, virtual resources, shared resources between colleagues, and personnel.

Participants discussed the importance of being provided time for designated responsibilities within their roles. Three participants indicated the importance and value of their collaborative time with CLTs, PLCs, and co-teachers that was provided by school-based administration. As one participant exclaimed, “*this not only allowed systems of support to be translated into the distance learning environment, but also provides a sense of normalcy during this time.*” Another participant added, “*I have been receiving support from administration by allowing ample time to plan and collaborate amongst our CLTs. We have been able to have the time to share resources, brainstorm, problem solve, and just vent.*”

4.3.2.2 Needed Instrumental Supports

Within the domain of instrumental support, participants described needs that were within the components of resources, time, and materials. Participants noted that within the component of resources, the two main themes that arose were the need for shared resources within teams and personnel. Participants voiced the need to have access to resources from general education in order to modify and adapt them appropriately, as well as support to modify the general education curriculum for students who accessed adapted curriculum. In order to adequately support students in the classroom, participants also shared the importance of having access to a teaching assistant. One participant exclaimed, “*I need my TA to be present in my virtual classroom at all times during the school day... he is often pulled out to cover in person classes...*” Without the adequate resources and personnel, participants expressed feelings of being ‘*overwhelmed*,’ ‘*stressed*,’ ‘*isolated*,’ and ‘*unsupported*.’

4.3.3 Informational Support

4.3.3.1 Provided Informational Support

Participants discussed several components that were related to the dimension of informational support. The individual component that received the most attention was professional development. Professional development was described by

participants as: (a) explaining who provided or communicated about a specific professional development opportunity, (b) types of professional development they received during distance learning, and (c) the value of the professional development. Providers of the professional development varied from county, Office of Special Education, school-wide, and lead teacher. Participants indicated their school-based administrators and/or their lead teacher/department chair actively communicated regarding professional development that was considered beneficial or appropriate to meet the needs of the staff or students. However, the majority of participants described county-wide professional development as *'overwhelming,' 'quantity over quality,'* and *'not meeting specific needs of students.'* As one teacher stated, *"above the school level (professional developments) there's a lot more trainings, which has been overwhelming."* Participants who were in self-contained settings described the county-wide trainings as *'general'* and did not meet the specialized needs of students with intellectual or multiple disabilities. At the school level, participants indicated that professional development included activities such as *'virtual technology'* training, *'observing other teachers,' 'specialized programs,'* and even *'book clubs.'*

Information of knowing what was occurring in the school and school operations was an additional component within the dimension of informational support that was discussed by participants. Information was described by participants as provided most frequently by school-based administration, team lead/department chair, and colleagues. Provisionally-licensed special education teachers most frequently looked toward the school-based administration, specifically the principal, for guidance and direction. Participants described the information trickling from administration, to the team lead or department chair, to members of the special education team. Information that was provided was particularly important for teachers to feel that they were *'in the loop'* and *'knew what was going on'* during distance learning.

4.3.3.2 Needed Informational Support

Participants shared numerous needs within the dimension of informational support. The two components that were the most prevalent across interviews and journal entries were professional development and information. The majority of participants discussed the need for more targeted professional development to meet the needs of their specific population of students. The professional development provided to provisionally-licensed special education teachers was described as *'a waste of time,' 'very generic,'* and *'forced'* and teachers advocated they needed professional development in areas such as: *'classroom management,' 'evidence-based practices,' 'adapted curriculum,'* and *'parent support and involvement.'*

Participants noted the importance of being provided accurate and timely guidance related to school operations (i.e. schedules, instruction, parent involvement) and special education related topics. Overwhelmingly, participants described chaotic periods of not being given guidance and feeling a lack of confidence in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities within teaching. As one participant described,

"we would ask our designee questions, which they wouldn't know. So, they would ask their supervisors and they wouldn't really know so then it would go all over the place and then we would ask our friends at a different school and they would say the complete opposite things."

Participants described being given deadlines for specific tasks, but not having access to all of the information required, making them feel *'overwhelmed,' 'stressed'* and *'anxious.'*

4.3.4 Appraisal Support

4.3.4.1 Provided Appraisal Support

Appraisal support was the least discussed dimension across the participants; however, within this dimension, feedback was discussed most frequently. Participants discussed feedback as it related specifically to the teacher evaluation cycle and formal observations within the process. Feedback was described as *'general'* by participants whose school-based administrators did not possess a special education background to *'pretty specific to my role'* for participants whose school-based administrators had special education experience. As one participant stated, *"I do appreciate her consistent feedback regarding how I'm doing in the classroom. It's always constructive and she offers suggestions on how to fix it."* Similarly to the need to be acknowledge and recognized within the emotional support dimension, participants voiced their appreciation for receiving praise. Two participants indicated the positive impact praise had on their satisfaction within their position and gave them more confidence in their abilities.

4.3.4.2 Needed Appraisal Support

Appraisal support was the least discussed across House's (1981) dimensions. Only one participant discussed the need for additional praise within the domain of appraisal support. She emphasized the importance of special education teachers being recognized for the work and contributions within the classroom and the school community. As she described, *"A little shout out for student achievement would be nice and hopefully take the aura of invisibility away... as a special educator, I don't need any medals for teaching in person, but as a person, we all need validation that we can be seen."*

5. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to report on the perspectives of provisionally-licensed special education teachers as to the administrative support they experienced and they felt they needed when working under COVID-19 conditions. In total, five provisionally-licensed special education teachers who attended a Mid-Atlantic public university described their experiences with and perceptions of administrative support. Previous research on administrative support has not included provisionally-licensed special education teachers so it was critical to understand their perspective (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Though findings cannot be generalized due to the small sample and qualitative methods, there are four takeaways from this study that reinforce findings from previous research. First, findings from this study indicate the provisionally-licensed special education teachers need to receive supports across multiple dimensions (Cancio, 2013; House, 1981; Hughes et al., 2015, Prather-Jones, 2011). Although all four dimensions (House, 1981) were deemed important by participants, emotional support was found to be the most often discussed and valued by participants. This is similar to previous studies (Cancio et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2015; Prather-Jones, 2011). Providing provisionally-licensed special education teachers the necessary personnel, materials, resources, professional development, and feedback support is essential in order to create a positive school environment that fosters collaboration and professional growth (Albrecht et al., 2009; Ansley et al., 2019; Bettini et al., 2020; Cancio et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2015; Kaff, 2004; Prather-Jones, 2011).

Second, findings from these teachers indicate a need for school-based administrators to establish open communication that (a) provides provisionally-licensed special education teachers the information needed to function within their roles, (b) establishes the expectations of collaborative practices between school staff, and (c) is understood as a way for school-based administrators to convey to teachers they are cared for and supported (Albrecht et al., 2009; Ansley et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2015; Kaff, 2004; Player et al., 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011). Within collaboration, findings from the study indicate that these provisionally-licensed special education teachers relied on school-based administrators to establish collegial partnerships as well as provide the time to plan for instruction. This finding resonates in the literature, as collaborative partnerships and inclusivity were found to be a vital component within emotional support (Ansley et al., 2019; Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Prather-Jones, 2011) that influenced workplace relationships and overall job satisfaction (Ansley et al. 2019; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Provisionally-licensed special education teachers within the study shared differing perspectives about receiving support from administration through being provided collaborative time and expectations of collaboration between general and special education teachers. These findings impacted teachers' attitudes, their feelings of being valued members of their school community, and ultimately the support they received from school-based administration.

Third, participants who had school-based administrators with special education experience noted the positive impact it had on the types of support they provided, which has been reinforced in previous research (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Frost & Kersten, 2011). This finding is also aligned to previous research that has found that school-based administrators who possess the knowledge and skills to provide adequate support for special education teachers working directly with students with disabilities can create positive environments for their staff (Albrecht et al., 2009; Ansley et al., 2019; Billingsley, 2004). Lastly, provisionally-licensed special education teachers in this study indicated that some of the support that was received was not the type of support that they needed. For example, although they received professional development, it was not targeted to their specific needs or the needs of their students. This further supports the need for school-based administrators to possess adequate knowledge and understanding of special education in order to ensure that special education teachers are provided necessary growth producing professional development and feedback (Ax et al., 2001; Blanton et al., 2006; Billingsley et al., 2004; Boscardin & Lashley, 2012; Correa & Wagner, 2011; Steinbrecher et al., 2015). These findings reinforce previous research that has shown special education teachers who lack needed supports from school-based administrators can negatively impact career decisions. Special education teachers who receive the appropriate supports from school-based administrators, will experience more job satisfaction and higher levels of commitment to the field (Cancio et al., 2013; Littrell et al., 1994).

Findings from this study identify numerous school-based administrator practices employed or believed to be beneficial for provisionally-licensed special education teachers (See Appendix). For example, these teachers expressed a desire for autonomy to make instructional decisions for their students. However, there was little discussion regarding the importance of feedback in strengthening instruction for student outcomes. This is aligned to Billingsley and Bettini's (2019) special education teacher and retention systematic review, which indicated that there is a lack of research that used strong measures of teacher quality or effectiveness to examine whether their knowledge, skills, or self-efficacy are related to their career decisions. This finding reflects the need for additional research that explores relational, leadership, and administrative actions that support special education teachers' instruction and associate the actions with career decisions (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

6. Limitations

There are at least three important limitations to this study. First, the research team relied on university-based instructors as gatekeepers to potential participants, which limited the researchers' ability to access eligible participants for the study. Second, participant demographics are primarily homogeneous. It would be valuable to elicit more information from a more diverse group of participants, including males, racially diverse, and variety of school levels (i.e. middle and high school), in order to deepen our understanding of administrative supports of provisionally-licensed special education teachers. The researchers' decision to utilize convenience sampling to recruit participants for the study impacted the ability to examine differences among participants. Third, the first author independently conducted all interviews with participants. The use of a co-facilitator could have offered assistance in either asking interview protocol questions or taking detailed field notes during the interviews to better capture observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first author conducted all interviews virtually through Zoom.

7. Conclusions

Due to critical special education shortages, underqualified provisionally-licensed special education teachers are filling vacancies in special education. Further, due to their status, provisionally-licensed special education teachers require intensive supports from school-based administrators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Support provided by school-based administrators has been cited as a factor that influences special education teachers' career decisions (Albrecht et al., 2009; Billingsley, 2004; Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011). This study describes how provisionally-licensed special education teachers require differentiated supports across emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support dimensions in order to feel supported during a distance learning environment. School-based administrator practices that cultivate open communication, establish autonomy and collaborative practices, build teacher capacity, and provide relevant professional development targeted to teacher and student needs will support special education teachers and students with disabilities in a distance learning environment. Future research in this area should include a broader and more diverse sample of special educators as well as the voices of the special education administrators.

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Appendix

Administrative Support Needs for Special Education Teachers Across Dimensions and Categories

Dimension	Category	Description of Need
Emotional Support	Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clear and consistent communication • Use communication as a way to inform school operations as well as building relationships with staff • Use a variety of communication methods (i.e. verbal, electronic, handwritten) to reach all staff
	Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide teacher autonomy through instructional decision making • Demonstrate trust in teacher autonomy
	Collegial Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a collaborative school culture that emphasizes teacher partnerships and inclusion • Provide the space and time for authentic collaboration between staff
Instrumental Support	Appreciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize and acknowledge staff contributions to the school community and students
	Materials/Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide adequate materials and resources for instructional purposes • Ensure teachers have shared collaborative time for planning • Protect instructional time • Access to personnel support (i.e. paraprofessional) to support students with disabilities
Informational Support	Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide relevant professional development opportunities that correspond to student and teacher needs • Ensure professional development is tied to instructional practice
	Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clear and consistent communication regarding school functioning and specific staff roles and responsibilities • Provide accurate and timely direction and guidance related to school operations and teacher roles
Appraisal Support	Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide specific feedback that matches the role of the teacher • Ensure individualized feedback informs instructional practice and matches student needs

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