Compliance Amid Complexity?:

How People, Policies, and a Pandemic Shape Special Education in Practice

By

Helen Rose Miesner

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The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:
Erica O. Turner, Associate Professor, Educational Policy Studies
Lesley Bartlett, Professor, Educational Policy Studies
Andrea Ruppar, Associate Professor, Special Education
Linn Posey-Maddox, Professor, Educational Policy Studies
Simone Schweber, Professor, Educational Policy Studies

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Abstract

This comparative case study documents how special education policy takes form in practice, particularly in the context of virtual and hybrid learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. I draw on interviews, observations, and document analysis from two purposively sampled elementary schools and I contextualize these accounts through interviews and document analysis at the district, state, and federal levels. I highlight how policy actors conceptualized a "free, appropriate public education" and how special education teachers compromised FAPE when faced with limited time and guidance, technological challenges borne of virtual instruction, and varied student attendance. In addition to examining FAPE in relation to special education teachers' work with students, I illuminate how policies regarding the roles of other educational staff, namely paraprofessionals and district-level special education support staff, shape the work of special education teachers. I interrogate how varying understandings of paraprofessional roles and training requirements across policy scales relate to the practical work of these staff members and special education teachers. I also examine how staff members differently engaged with a district-created instructional coach position for special education, with attention to how differential role structures at each school shaped this engagement and impacted special education teachers. Throughout this work, I examine how actors funneled, narrowed, or rejected policy in practice. Overall, I demonstrate how policies and practices across federal, state, and local levels converged with school contexts and special education teachers' logic[s] of compliance to shape distinct street-level enactments of special education policy.

Introduction

> *It's 7:15 am on a Tuesday morning in 2014. Our school secretary informs me that two of our school's five paraprofessionals are absent without substitutes. My jaw slackens. I thank her and stride down the hall toward two other special education teachers who have commenced the near-daily process of shifting instructional schedules to compensate for staff absences. One colleague will assign independent work to her reading groups so that she can support a fifth grader with feeding and toileting throughout the day. I will cancel my social skills groups and skip my lunch break to provide behavior regulation support for my second-grade students. My other colleague previously planned to forego her morning interventions as her third graders are taking the state reading exam, but she will merge her kindergarten and first grade math groups this afternoon. School buses won't arrive for another hour, yet we already have undermined the free and appropriate public education to which our students are entitled.* (Personal reflection)

Nearly every aspect of my work as a special education teacher related to the execution of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act (IDEA). IDEA mandates that students with disabilities have access to a "free and appropriate public education" (FAPE) in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE) per legally binding Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs; IDEA, 2004). Though execution of policy is the core work of special education teachers, influences ranging from ground-level paraprofessional absences (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Miesner, 2021) to state and local policies (Russell & Bray, 2013; Voulgarides, 2018) contribute to variable enactments of IDEA in practice.

The COVID-19 pandemic and consequent federal, state, and local responses further complicated the work of special education teachers. The virtual learning opportunities afforded

the general student body were often insufficient for those students whose educational progress relied on daily routines and access to physical materials as outlined by their individualized education programs (Shapiro & Harris, 2020). Further, issues ranging from the incompatibility of assistive technology devices with virtual platforms to the loss of access to specialized professionals (Hill, 2020; Shapiro & Harris, 2020) compounded the hardships of virtual instruction for students with disabilities. Still, federal law compelled schools to provide FAPE, defined by the Supreme Court in 2017 as "an educational program reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances" (*Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1, 2017*). Though several studies address the perceptions of special education teachers (Sayman & Cornell, 2021) and teacher working conditions (Kraft, Simon, & Lyon, 2020; Bartlett, et al., 2021) during this period, limited work (Woulfin & Jones, 2021) attends to how policy evolved across federal, state, district, and school spaces to shape the work of special education teachers amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address this gap, I examine the enactment of special education policy from federal to local actors to unpack how IDEA impacted practice—particularly during the COVID-19 era. Across three findings chapters, I highlight how policy actors conceptualized FAPE, the role of paraprofessionals, and a district-level special education support position and how these polices shaped the work of special education teachers. Drawing on comparative case study methods and a policy as/in practice approach to enactment, this study asks:

1. What actions characterize the enactment of special education policy across federal, state, district, and school levels?
2. How do federal, state, and local policies shape the daily work of special education teachers?

This study examines four distinct scales—federal, state, district, and school—to capture how actors across these spaces translate policy and how these processes impact the work of special education teachers. I situated this study in two elementary schools, Bradbury and Thompson, which I purposively sampled (Merriam, 1998) for their relatively similar student populations and educational programming. Both schools are in Firglade, a mid-sized Midwestern school district. Special education teachers in this Midwestern state take on cross categorical roles in which they work with students with varied disabilities, ranging from autism to emotional behavioral disorder. Rather than specializing in a single disability category, special education teachers in this state must support and teach students with diverse needs in a manner that complies with IDEA.

I examined these scales during the COVID-19 time period, specifically March 2020 through June 2021, while drawing on policy created prior to this period as a point of comparison. The pandemic and accompanying policy responses created unprecedented challenges for actors across scales. In addition to changing the nature of schooling for students and educators' and administrators' work, this period also shaped the spaces in which actors conducted their work, as virtual platforms replaced physical spaces and created new dimensions within school and administrative contexts. Teachers continued to grapple with material factors such as technology and internet access as a direct result of the pandemic. Yet, considerations of physical space changed amid shifts to virtual instruction and informed the methodological approach to this research as well as its substantive focus.

I demonstrate that policy actors variably funneled, narrowed, or rejected special education policy in the process of enactment. Policy enactment at the state and district level typically reflected funneling or narrowing, whereas actors at the school level more frequently

narrowed or rejected policy. School level actors at separate sites differently interpreted aspects of policy, which influenced their engagement in policy enactment.

I further argue that federal, state, and local policies shaped special education teachers' work by outlining initial responsibilities. However, with limited guidance or support for carrying out these responsibilities, special education teachers employed professional discretion and drew on "logic[s] of compliance" (Voulgarides, 2018) to prioritize the aspects of special education service provision they found most pressing, albeit within the broader policy directives. The context in which special education teachers worked, including virtual instructional environments and administrative practices, were a product of policy itself and further informed how they approached meeting the responsibilities outlined through special education policy and informed their participation in policy enactment.

Literature Review

In the following section, I provide a brief overview of the literature that grounds this work. I begin by discussing existing frameworks for understanding the work of special education teachers. I include empirical findings regarding influences on special education policy in practice. I also discuss work regarding policy influence and policy implementation.

Work and Working Conditions of Special Education Teachers

Studies of special educator time use exemplify the various activities in which special educators engage as part of their work, including instruction, paperwork, and collaboration (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010; Vannest, Hagan-Burke, Parker, & Soares, 2011). Some studies indicate that special educators spend approximately 40% of their day instructing student through direct academic instruction, non-academic instruction, and instructional support. The remainder of their day is spent engaged in paperwork, collaboration, behavior management, and state

testing, among other various responsibilities. However, other scholarship (Miesner, 2021) indicates that special education teachers spend the majority of their day engaged in instruction or addressing unexpected issues and then complete paperwork outside of contract hours.

These varied findings can be attributed in part to the role of differential working conditions for special education teachers. Per their review of the literature regarding the working conditions of special education teachers, Bettini, et al. (2016) posit that opportunities to learn, plan, and teach are impacted by: collegial support; material resources, planning time, instructional grouping, instructional time, and professional development. These conditions are nested within the greater contextual realms of administrative support and school culture (p. 186). Such factors influence special education teachers' engagement with IDEA through their instructional decisions (Ruppar, Gaffney, & Dymond, 2015; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018), the content they include in IEPs (Ruppar and Gaffney, 2011; Bray & Russell, 2018), and the quality of inclusive education practices (Love & Horn, 2019; Stelitano, Russell, & Bray, 2019, Naraian, 2014). Further, school contexts influence how practitioners exercise agency to determine student needs and define professional roles (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018).

Other scholars conceptualize the working conditions of special educators more broadly. Ruppar, Allcock, and Gonsier-Gerdin (2017) apply an ecological systems framework to examine how special education teachers are situated in relation to students and student access to the general education curriculum. This lens nests students and their characteristics in greater micro- (teachers), meso- (IEP systems), exo-(teacher training), macro-(policy), and chrono-(temporal) systems that relate to student access to general education content. Hudson and colleagues (2016) also reference the role of social, personnel, and material resources within the greater- socio historical context in which teachers work, and Billingsley and colleagues (2020) noted that the

roles and responsibilities of teachers, including caseload management and providing instruction across content areas, are situated within broader contexts that include a shifting political economy of special education, as well as institutional supports.

In contrast to work that emphasizes teacher quality and effectiveness (Billingsley & Bettini, 2017), conceptualized as qualifications, use of practices deemed effective, or the achievement of desired outcomes, these studies examine how contexts constrain, enable, and otherwise influence special educators in their work. Voulgarides (2018) examines the greater socio-cultural context in which special education exists and the consequent detriment that the race blind framework of IDEA has for actual service provision. Though existing research identifies how IDEA influences the work of school and district staff in regard to policy incoherence with NCLB (Russell & Bray, 2013), racial disproportionality in special education (Voulgarides, 2018), and racialized inequities in disciplinary infractions (Voulgarides, 2021), the multiple facets and ramifications of this legislation require further examination. Namely, research must grapple with intersections and incongruencies within IDEA itself, including provision of FAPE, adherence to IEPs, and access to the general education environment.

Dynamic Working Conditions

In addition to relatively static policy environments, which shift over periods of months and years, daily fluctuations and challenges within the classroom also shape the practice of special education teachers. My prior work conceptualizes such challenges, including regular changes in general education classroom schedules and frequent absences of paraprofessionals, as *dynamic working conditions*—those specific elements of a practitioner's work that exhibit paradoxically frequent yet unpredictable fluctuations, requiring consequent attention or reactions

from the practitioner. These unstable conditions dictate different responses and elicit different forms of policy enactment on a day-to-day basis.

Ghere and York-Barr also documented how special education teachers employ “transitional strategies” (2007, p. 28) in light of staff absences. They found:

> When understaffed, makeshift systems for covering responsibilities were necessarily developed. The teachers prioritized coverage for those students with the greatest needs or at the greatest risk. Health and safety needs received the highest priority in terms of staff coverage, with instructional priorities being of secondary importance. These transitional strategies altered the schedules of many staff and students. Sometimes, major program components were put into limbo until coverage was found.

Paraprofessional turnover, among other factors, thus holds ramifications for how special education teachers can complete the responsibilities of their work and thus enact special education policy.

Prior work also demonstrates the relevance of daily fluctuations for grade level teachers. For example, Kennedy’s (2006) general educators faced reform-driven fluctuations that further constituted the environments in which they worked, influencing how teachers covered various instructional topics and to which students they directed their attention. Lampert (2001) examined the continuous calculus that general educators undertake to manage the classroom-based fluctuations and variables of their work. Such complexities, as she refers to them, entailed decision-making regarding which students to call upon, when to redirect students, and the pace at which to continue a lesson in light of student understanding. In their argument for including increased amounts of practice in teacher preparation, Ball and Forzani (2009) more broadly framed these reactive pieces, including leading discussions and evoking student responses, along

with core tasks of the profession as “the work of teaching” (p. 497). Additionally, Cohen (2011) asserts that the uncertainty and complexity of teaching, including relying on student cooperation and knowledge to develop students’ understandings of additional concepts, comprise “predicaments” (p. 14) with which teachers grapple.

Policy Interpretation and Implementation

An extensive body of literature interrogates policy interpretation and implementation. Differences in professionals’ prior knowledge, value systems, and understandings yield differing interpretations of the similar policy message and confusion of messages with their pre-existing ideas (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006; Hill, 2006; Coburn, 2001.) Further, the tools or materials that actors use impact how they understand and engage with the context in which they are situated (Wertsch, 1997; Lasky, 2005). Social contexts, including schools, relationships with students and coworkers, professional identifications, and traditions, also influence how practitioners come to particular understandings about policy (Lasky, 2005; Cobb, McClain, Lamberg, & Dean, 2003), as described through collective sensemaking (Coburn, 2001) and distributed cognition (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). Further, communities of practice (Wegner, 2008) and discourse communities (Hill, 2006) inform how practitioners make and wield meaning regarding policy.

Organizations also interact with policy. Through coupling, policy is embedded into other accepted practices in the school day, such as organizational routines. Spillane, Parise, and Sherer (2011) empirically demonstrate how the monitoring of teachers’ lesson plans and measurement of student academic achievement were organizational routines that the administration “coupled” with accountability requirements to limit the options available for teachers to resist these policies. Buffering is the counter point to coupling, in which internal elements of schools,

including school culture, administration, formal organization for teachers and students, and social relationships between teachers and students insulate instruction from external pressures (Bryk, Lee, & Smith, 1990). Honig and Hatch relate the processes of buffering and bridging to "crafting coherence, " a strategy that districts and schools employ to simplify policy. Olsen and Sexton (2009) empirically demonstrate how a school considered the demands of No Child Left Behind a threat to its legitimacy and thus demonstrated "threat rigidity" as "the organization's stated goals [became] eclipsed by its desire to sustain itself" (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 13).

Administrators also importantly interact with policy. As demonstrated by Turner (2020), district administrators faced with shifting student demographics adopted managerial policies to mitigate inequity among students. However, these policies and accompanying practices, as informed by local contexts and broader accountability movements, served to perpetuate inequity. In other instances, administrators align policy with existing practices. Hamann and Lane (2004), for example, found that agents at the State Departments of Education of Maine and Puerto Rico differently co-authored Comprehensive School Reform policy by framing it through educational lenses with which they were already familiar and aligning it with existing policy within schools.

As documented by Booher-Jennings (2005), teachers under the pressures of an accountability system concentrated their resources on students on the cusp of passing, rather than providing instruction to all students, in accordance with a broader institutional logic. Diamond's research (2007) indicates that teachers working primarily with students of color in a low- income environment reacted to high-stakes testing by engaging in didactic pedagogical methods, or teaching to the test, rather than focusing on the policy's stated goals of emphasizing student mastery of specific content and the development of critical thinking skills by promoting interactive pedagogy.

Research also addresses how policies ostensibly aimed to support educational equity compromise educational opportunities for students with disabilities. The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act is imbued with efficiency-minded accountability metrics that often conflicted with the needs of the students it was conceived to serve (Voulgarides, 2018). Empirical work by Russell and Bray (2013) demonstrates how educators dealt with the inherent standardization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the individualization required by IDEA. The alignment of the policies impacted if and how practitioners enacted special education. This body of work exemplifies how policy infiltrates the work of ground level practitioners. The present study contributes to this body of work by examining how special education policy takes form, how virtual and policy contexts mediate these forms, and how practitioners enact these forms.

Theoretical Framework

I ground this research in a sociocultural approach to policy analysis, which holds that policy is “a complex social practice, an ongoing process of normative cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse social and institutional contexts” (Levinson & Sutton, 2001, p. 1). The methodologies, frameworks, and tools used within the sociocultural approach consequently embody the assumption that policy is not a linear operation of outputs and inputs but a nuanced, shifting process. In this study, I build upon three sociocultural concepts: Policy as/in practice, (Levinson & Sutton, 2001), street-level bureaucracy (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977), and the logic of compliance (Voulgarides, 2018). In this section, I first discuss policy as/in practice more broadly and then highlight aspects of this approach that I use in my work. I then introduce how practitioner discretion and street level bureaucracy complement this approach for the present study.

Policy as/in Practice

Policy as/in practice holds that the interpretations, priorities, and actions of people in multiple roles comprise policy (Levinson & Sutton, 2001). Iterations of this approach counter the procedural narrative of the techno rational policy perspective, in which policy makers conceive of an idea and practitioners at the ground level do or do not adequately execute it with fidelity (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Rather, policy as/in practice highlights the multiple contexts at play in the policy process and how actors at these levels engage with, appropriate (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009), enact (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2019) and/or co-construct (Datnow, 2006) policy as practice. Empirical work demonstrates the utility of this framework in addressing how actors negotiate school ranking systems (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000), language education policies (Menken & García, 2010); and bilingual education (Bartlett & García, 2011).

In this tradition, I take up Ball, Maguire, and Braun's (2012) concept of "enactment" to examine how policy is "interpreted and translated and reconstructed and remade in different but similar settings" (p. 6) by a network of actors, living and non-living. This lens provides insight into how multiple contexts, ranging from federal responses to the pandemic to varied remote learning environments, as well as actors and their varying motives, inform policy in practice. In considering the various elements that shape policy as practice, Ball, Maguire, & Braun (2012) specifically parse contexts that policy occupies into four categories. These are: situated contexts, which refer to the local history or environment; professional contexts, comprising of teacher value systems and school climate; material contexts, which refer to the material, temporal, and personnel resources available; and external contexts, which consist of broader policy contexts and requirements in which schools must function. In the present study, I consider the virtual instructional context as it extends professional and material contexts.

Policy as/in practice supports my examination of how the conditions in which teachers work influence their enactment of policy. This theory foregrounds how actions across scales permeate schools and classrooms. It also illuminates the information on which teachers draw and the sanctions and rewards used to motivate them to achieve policy goals, thus revealing conditions for enactment.

Street Level Bureaucracy and Practitioner Discretion

I also draw on studies of practitioner discretion, particularly street-level bureaucracy. Weatherly and Lipsky (1977) describe street level bureaucrats as those individuals who "interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs and have substantial discretion in the execution of their work." (p. 172) They further emphasize that street-level bureaucrats engage in these processes in the immediate interest of securing the conditions of their resource-austere work environments.

However, street-level bureaucrats also balance the roles of state agent and citizen agent (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). When acting as state agents, street-level bureaucrats focus teleologically on adherence to legal mandates, akin to those practitioners described by Weatherly and Lipsky. When acting as citizen agents, street-level bureaucrats make decisions based on cultural abidance to value systems. More specifically, citizen agents deem who is worthy of services and allocate resources accordingly rather than solely distributing resources in the interest of state goals. Though distinct, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) assert that street-level bureaucrats combine of both roles to undertake their work.

Other factors also drive street level bureaucrats' actions. Evans (2015) notes that street level bureaucrats likely consider factors outside of stress dissipation, including "commitments, interest[s] and concerns, professional understanding and analysis, or professional ideas of

appropriate responses and interventions," (p. 287) when serving clientele. Indeed, educators are known to consult outside sources and employ motivations outside of immediate stress dissipation when prioritizing their responsibilities (Evans, 2015; Timberlake, 2014; Goldstein; 2008). The processes involved in conducting this work, however, still adhere to those posited by Weatherly and Lipsky. Educators in many cases make the final decision regarding the modification of goals, rationing of services, and assertion of priorities. Further, teachers bring agency to their roles, drawing on elements of their school setting (Bray & Russell, 2018) as well as personal value systems and professional beliefs (Evans, 2015) in their engagement with policy (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977).

Additional work regarding special education teachers frames practitioner discretion in other ways. Voulgarides (2018, p.16) asserts that practitioners engage in the practice of satisficing. Per this practice, teachers "pick and choose which information they have available to act upon in order to develop solutions so that they can maximize rewards and minimize the costs of their work." Similarly, Timberlake (2014) describes special educators as consulting their personal ethical beliefs regarding disability and professional value systems as street-level bureaucrats in cost-benefit analysis to ascertain the extent to which academic activities would be meaningful in the long run when deciding upon granting students access to general education curriculum.

The Logic of Compliance

A line of work particularly relevant to the present study is Voulgarides's (2018) framing of the "logic of compliance." This theory addresses how district and school practitioners are heavily influenced by the legally binding nature and spectral threat of IDEA. Per Voulgarides (2021, p. 3):

> The logic of compliance in special education thus refers to the material, social, and cultural resources that educators draw on when they comply with IDEA. It also points to the racialized contextual and organizational logics that drive educational stakeholders' acts of compliance as they negotiate and enact policy mandates in practice.

Foundational work identifies the logic of compliance to examine how district staff address racial disproportionality in school districts (Voulgarides, 2018).

Anchored in Ray's (2019) framework of racialized organizations, Voulgarides's recent work further describes the logic of compliance in terms of identifying racism within schools. She writes:

> [T]he logic of compliance in special education recognizes that IDEA compliance is enacted within contested racialized mesospaces (e.g., organizations). It also recognizes that the interpretation of law and policy is both exogenous and endogenous to the schooling process. Thus, the logic of compliance serves as a vehicle through which the visibility of race and racialization processes are muted through seemingly benign bureaucratic and organizational structures that mediate individual prejudices and structural inequities through color-evasive processes (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). The logic of compliance thus hides the extent to which individual biases and structural racism interact and sustain racial inequity in educational outcomes through acts of policy compliance.

The logic of compliance consequently links the practices of school-based staff to racialized inequities with which IDEA is imbued (Etscheidt, Hernandez-Saca, & Voulgarides, 2022).

In the present study, I provide evidence of how policy, context and practitioner decisions shaped special education services provision in practice. Several of these decisions shed light on

racialized inequities borne of special education—disrupted service provision for students of color with disabilities; limited support for native Spanish speakers from special education teachers; racialized income inequities between paraprofessionals and special education teachers. However, in the present study, I do not systematically interrogate the extent to which FAPE, policy constructions of the paraprofessional role, and execution of the district program support teacher role shape inequitable, racialized, and classed outcomes for students and staff. I hope to pursue these questions in greater detail in future work.

That said, the logic of compliance remains a salient framework for examining the practical enactment of special education policy in this study. The logic of compliance overrides the substantive meaning of IDEA, as district and school staff become overtly focused on completing the tasks required by policy documents through narrow, legalistic processes. Focus on compliance with these tasks in turn compromises educational opportunities for students with disabilities. I employ this concept to probe how context mediates the resources on which special education teachers draw when addressing when addressing varied aspects of IDEA and the consequent ramifications for practice.

Taken together, this framework scaffolds my examination of how special education policy informs practice. The policy as/in practice approach highlights policy enactment across scales. Street-level bureaucracy then illuminates the local level, as it characterizes the relationship of special education teachers to policy enactment. Finally, the logic of compliance comprises an element on which special education teachers draw when engaging their personal discretion.

Significance

This study documents how special education policy takes form in practice, particularly in the context of virtual and hybrid learning during the pandemic. By highlighting the role of a variety of actors as well as the actions they undertake, this work reframes IDEA's trajectory during the COVID-19 pandemic as a group project rather than as policy simply taken up or ignored at the ground level. This work extends beyond the classroom to lay bare how elements borne outside of schools—including policies across scales and the COVID-19 context—shape or fail to shape local engagement with special education policy.

This work also contributes to existing literature regarding the mediating impact of school contexts on policy. By situating this work in two separate schools, I illustrate how differences among school-level systems and actors inform the work of special education teachers. These factors, including instructional formats and caseload practices, functioned in some instances as an aspect of special education teachers' work. However, in the instances of administrative involvement and scheduling approaches, they also informed special education teachers' work. This study thus highlights the duality present in relationships between practitioners and their work contexts.

My research also provides ground-level insights regarding how special education teachers undertake the responsibilities of serving students with disabilities within a virtual learning context. In addition to providing insights into the work of teachers and the educational lives of students during this unprecedented time, this study highlights the broader challenges faced by special education teachers, the resources on which these practitioners draw when determining how to serve students with disabilities, and the implications of these decisions for students. Thus, this project thus contributes to the growing body of research literature that examines the working

conditions of special education teachers by explicitly tracing how broader sociopolitical contexts connect to the classroom level.

Chapter Overviews

In chapter two, I review my methodology. I describe my use of the comparative case study approach and my orientation to context throughout this project. I provide detail regarding my study context and purposive site selection. I then describe my approach to data collection, which involved interviews, observations, and document analysis, as well as my approach to data analysis. Throughout this section, I share candid reflections on conducting research during a pandemic and reflect on my positionality as a researcher.

Chapter three examines the practical enactment of FAPE during the COVID-19 pandemic. I first outline how policy makers across federal, state, and local levels enacted FAPE during this period, with specific attention to how the broader conception of FAPE became narrowly defined in practice. I then look at how special education teachers engaged with this already narrowed version of FAPE. I argue that policy directives intersected with ground-level factors, such as student attendance, to inform the aspects of special education service provision that special education teachers prioritized.

In chapter four, I highlight how policy scales differently defined the role of paraprofessionals while consistently funneling calls for training of paraprofessionals from the federal to the ground level. As policy assertions regarding paraprofessional training did not align with available resources and the practical realities of their work, special education teachers variably engaged in training of paraprofessionals. Nevertheless, the management of paraprofessionals comprised an important part of the work of special education teachers that shaped special education in practice.

I focus on how a district-specific policy—the role of resource teachers for special education (RTSE)— informed the work of special education teachers in chapter five. Though both schools featured an RTSE, the differential structures and enactments of this role influenced the workload of special education teachers. I demonstrate how RTSE enactments shaped the responsibilities with which special education teachers were tasked and informed the extent to which administrators involved themselves in special education programming.

In my final chapter, I discuss the empirical and theoretical contributions of my findings. I synthesize how and why ground level enactments of FAPE and paraprofessional management did not align with the expectations outlined in IDEA. I also emphasize the role of policy enactment across scales and the logic of compliance in shaping these aspects of IDEA as well as the district based RTSE role. I also describe how my extension of the logic of compliance to consider dueling priorities within IDEA comprises a theoretical contribution to the field.

Chapter 2

Methodology

I leverage theoretical and methodological aspects of the comparative case study (CCS) approach (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) to identify the processes that characterize the enactment of special education policy and to interrogate the ramifications of these processes for the work of special education teachers. In keeping with the sociocultural approach to policy analysis (Levinson & Sutton, 2001), CCS asserts that policy is not implemented through a linear operation of outputs and inputs. Rather, ground-level practice is shaped by multiple factors; in the present study, these factors range from student needs to material, temporal, and personnel resources to policy decisions at the state and federal levels.

Per this approach, study context extends beyond the immediate physical setting to include the broader historical and sociopolitical elements that shape policy processes, including social movements and competing legislative priorities. In understanding how and why individual special education teachers engage with aspects of special education policy, I use CCS to examine the interplay of actors across micro- (school), meso- (district and state), and macro- (federal and sociopolitical) levels; the enactment of similar policies in distinct, socially-produced locations; and the development and appropriation of policy and practices across time and space. I conducted extensive fieldwork and employed ethnographic methods, including observations, interviews, and document analysis to uncover perceptions and practices across these varied spaces (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010).

Study Context and Site Selection

My conception of context within this study is necessarily fluid. While schools, for example, function as specific organizational contexts, they also overlap with and are shaped by

the temporal context of COVID-19. Similarly, while the practices of a single grade level teaching team serve as context, these decisions function within broader trends of underfunded special education programs (McCann, 2014). Further, as schooling moved from physical settings to virtual spaces, events including morning meeting routines, assignment of students to breakout rooms, and interruptions borne of technical difficulties all comprised context independent of the physical space of schools.

Nevertheless, analytical pragmatism calls for some delineation of scale. The intended reach of policies created at specific levels relative to other scales informed my approach to delineation. I began with scales in which actors exerted comparatively broader influence, including the district, state, and federal level. I then focused on scales in which actors held smaller spheres of influence, namely classrooms and schools. In the following section, I describe the federal policy context for IDEA, as well as the state, district, and school contexts in which this study takes place.

Federal Policy Background

In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) with bipartisan support. Following the rhetoric of equality and solidarity invoked by the Civil Rights Act (1964), the EHA guaranteed a free and appropriate education for all students with disabilities. Later dubbed the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), this legislation enacted a process of evaluation and service provision to identify and accommodate individuals that were previously underserved. Mainly, this legislation stated that students with disabilities were entitled to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Parents, teachers, and other practitioners involved in the student's education would meet regularly to devise an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that articulated goals for the student's

academic achievement and the necessary services to facilitate achievement of these goals. Further, the responsibility of identifying students with disabilities fell to schools, and parents could now advocate for the qualification of their students with disabilities in special education programming through due process procedure.

While the IDEA informed students with disabilities that they had a right to a free, appropriate public education, it did not guarantee funds for the actual provision of this education. At the time of enactment, the cost of educating a student with disabilities was approximately two times that of educating a general education student, a trend that continues at present (McCann, 2014; Kolbe, 2019). Despite a 1997 revision to the original funding formula, which provided funds based on number of pupils who qualified for special education, the new formula administered funds on the basis of the prior year's amount, the overall share of children in poverty, and the share of the eligible school-aged population. This recalculation was in part to ensure that schools did not qualify students for special education for the sole purpose of receiving district funding. However, under this new formula, despite rising special education costs, federal contributions have decreased from a high of 33 percent in 2009 to 15 percent as of 2019 (Kolbe, 2019). This is far below the federal contribution of 40 percent under which special education programming is considered fully funded.

The absence of federal funding thus places the financial onus on state and local institutions. Schools are legally mandated by IDEA to maintain funding by matching prior years' contributions; therefore, they must cannibalize other budgets for funding or be penalized (Samuels, 2010). Waiver systems have been introduced that allow states to contribute less to special education than in prior years when budgets have been impacted by natural disaster or

other catastrophes. However, the prevailing knowledge that these waivers are rarely granted discourages states from applying for them (Samuels , 2010).

Additionally, the funding actually provided by the federal government is disparate between districts. As noted by McCann (2014), per student allocations range from $100 to $4000. As of 2014, school districts in the 10th percentile received an average of $164 per student, while districts in the 90th percentile receive $271 per student. High-enrollment districts received slightly less allocation per pupil than small districts. As a result of the revised formula, a greater amount of federal funding is provided to high-poverty districts than low-poverty districts (McCann, 2014). However, the overall underfunding of high-poverty districts compared to low-poverty districts likely mitigates any benefit these schools receive (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). Recent research connects increases in special education funding to better academic outcomes for students with disabilities (Cruz, et al. 2020), alluding to how funding constraints complicate educator capacities to comply with IDEA by limiting access to personnel, material, and temporal resources.

Firglade

Firglade school district serves over 25,000 students in a mid-sized midwestern city (Table 1). Local descriptions of the city tout its progressive reputation relative to the remainder of the state, and the county is a dark blue on maps of presidential electoral results. The surface level progressivism of Firglade is belied, however, by economical and racial segregation. A non-partisan research report released within the past decade highlighted that Firglade fostered some of the widest disparities between Black and White[1] citizens nationwide. These racialized and classed inequities permeate the school district. State accountability data indicates that Black and

[1] I capitalize the ‘w’ in “White” throughout this manuscript to counter orientations toward Whiteness as a normative or objective entity in educational policy discourse. (Dumas, Dixon, & Mayorga, 2016)

Indigenous students in Firglade are less likely to finish high school than their White peers. Further, White students demonstrate proficient or advanced literacy skills as measured by statewide achievement tests at greater rates than their peers in any other racial group. Racialized inequities are also pervasive beyond school walls. For example, at the time of the study, Black student (8.2%), Indigenous students (7.6%), and Latinx students (2.3%) were more likely to face homelessness in Firglade than their White peers (.4%).

This city-level context is also situated in broader state and nationwide trends of teacher de-professionalization and disempowerment. Recent state-wide right-to-work legislation was an intentional effort to decrease teachers' union influence and resulted in decreased median compensation for teachers. This trend has converged with increased rates of teachers leaving the profession and decreased average teacher experience. These broader shifts within the state's teaching profession hold implications for the working conditions of remaining teachers and staff and the quality of education available to Firglade students.

Akin to districts across the nation (Turner, 2020), Firglade faced austerity measures at the time of the study. In 2019, the Democratic governor's $1.4 billion proposal for state education was cut down to $583 million by the Republican legislature. Special education received $95 million—$516 million short of the Governor's original ask for special education programming. Additional cuts to state revenues due to COVID-19 have further impacted the state's public schools. In June 2020, Firglade's school board cut $823,497 in special education funding as part of a larger set of budgetary cuts. Consequently, Firglade provided an opportunity to investigate the implications that school funding constraints currently plaguing a vast array of American schools held for special education programming.

Preceding the pandemic, Firglade was working towards an inclusive model of education in which students with disabilities receive appropriately scaffolded instruction alongside their general education peers. However, some instruction for students with disabilities occurred in a space distinct from their general education peers and/or with an alternative curriculum. School approaches largely directed how special education teachers divided caseloads and the extent to which special education teachers collaborated with general education staff. In some instances, special education teachers supported particular grade levels; in others, they worked with students with comparable needs. Paraprofessionals supported special education programming and in the schools in this study supported specific special education teachers. My findings chapters provide further insights into how and why these aspects of special education programming varied by school.

Schools

I purposively sampled (Merriam, 1998) two elementary schools serving pre-kindergarten through fifth grade for their relatively similar student populations and differential academic performance. The demographic composition of students at these schools is summarized in Table 1. Both sites host dual-language instruction (DLI) programs that largely serve native Spanish speakers as well as English only instruction (ELI) classrooms. Both sites also serve larger proportions of Hispanic students than the broader district, with 40 percent and 45 percent of students at the first and second sites, respectively, identifying as Hispanic (compared to 24 percent in the broader district). The first site, Thompson, received an accountability rating of five stars on the state report card, indicating that it "significantly exceeds expectations" for school performance. By contrast, the second school, Bradbury, received a three-star rating, indicating that it "meets expectations." Research demonstrates that school achievement and consequent

accountability pressures influence teachers' pedagogical and curricular strategies (Diamond, 2007) and therefore serve as relevant facets of organizational contexts. These sites provided an opportunity to identify and examine how aforementioned sociopolitical elements are differently mediated by school contexts and reflected in the perceptions and practices of special education teachers.

Table 1
Student Demographics in District and Schools

	Firglade District	Thompson Elementary	Bradbury Elementary
Race			
Asian	8.4%	4.6%	6.2%
Black	18.1%	18%	16.1%
Hispanic	23%	39.2%	45%
American Indian	.2%	.4%	-
Pacific Islander	.1%	-	.6%
Two or more races	9.3%	12.7%	11.7%
White	41%	25.1%	20.4%
Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	50.7%	64.3%	70.5%
Students with disabilities	14.8%	17.4%	14.6%
Total students	26151	482	471

Note. Categories reflect language from state department of education

Organizational context

My study took place virtually, which limited my insight into and relevance of the physical school building. To understand the organizational context in which teachers work, I highlight the leadership styles of principals. Prior work by Bettini (2016) demonstrates that administrators shape how special education teachers approach their work. This held true for the present study.

Bradbury

Nigel worked as Bradbury's principal for the past twelve years, coming to the role after working as a paraprofessional, elementary teacher, instructional coach, and assistant principal within the Firglade district. Nigel indicated the importance of agency among school staff and described Bradbury as follows:

> I think we've been consistently pushing the boundaries of what it means to be a public elementary school. […] Whether it was our early work with one-to-one technology, or early work with digging into the Common Core State Standards, or our more progressive work of really trying to redefine how schools, students, teachers, communities are judged, the metrics that are used, what those metrics are, and how they're valued. We're holding kind of the district accountable. (Interview, 1/26/21)

This excerpt positions Bradbury somewhat at odds with the district, pushing boundaries and redefining metrics and the value thereof. These metrics refer to school climate survey data frequently omitted from evaluations of the school on the part of the district and state, despite families and students generally ranking Bradbury highly. Nigel's assertion that the district is an entity that needs to be held "accountable" suggests skepticism regarding district values and how these values are or aren't translated in practice, as evidenced by his criticism of the RTSE role in chapter five.

Nigel emphasized the role of Bradbury teachers in determining the daily school operations. He described his leadership styles as follows:

> So, the closest leadership philosophy I can align to is Margaret Wheatley's work, which is really about just kind of a grassroots bottom-up conversational, like relational, organizational philosophy, rather. It's the antithesis of organization charts and mandates

> and fooling yourself into thinking that compliance measures actually change people. It's a recognition that humans are always creative, and will always do what they think is right, not what they're told. (Interview, 1/26/21)

Here, Nigel questioned "compliance measures," framing them as ineffective and instead foregrounds the power of communal relationships and individual creativity in the work of schools.

Nigel encouraged grade level teachers to reach out to families and to schedule instruction accordingly, an approach he further described in the following:

> From the very beginning, what I said was that we have to have a customized approach and that the best strategy that we will have won't come from a mandate from me or somebody else about 'everybody must do this.' But knowing that in our community, we have people who work third shift, and we have people who have different preferences […] So I outlined a strategy of saying, asking teachers to reach out to their families just to say, you know, 'What's going to work for you?' (Interview, 1/26/21)

In this excerpt, Nigel indicated prioritizing the needs of families when scheduling instruction by grade level. Teacher teams, rather than administration, held responsibility for connecting with families to determine appropriate instructional schedules.

Thompson

Evan was in his eighth year as principal of Thompson, coming to the role after working as a teacher and PBIS coach at Thompson. Evan spoke similarly of trusting teachers, though evidenced more alignment with district procedures than Nigel. In describing his leadership style, Evan noted:

> I'm a systems guy but I'm also a relational guy, so it's — It kind of plays from those two things, I think, is giving [teachers] a space to operate and to use their skills well and being available to monitor and kind of nurture and continue that growth. (Interview, February 1, 2021)

Though Evan described giving teachers latitude to "use their skills," he also spoke to his responsibility to "monitor" and oversee their work.

Evan described his approach as mostly hands-off, until teachers required some sort of intervention from his standpoint. He spoke to the nature of his role particularly during COVID:

> And then in an organizational sense — is my presence I think is important just from the standpoint of being at team meetings, offering that verbal support somewhat symbolically, right? Because we're in this weird space of like, I'm not present always with them and their students, or for the students that are receiving in-person [instruction], I'm not in that [in-person classroom] because that's not — that's a safety thing that we don't want to do, and we don't want to violate. And I think presence is really of importance and availability is very important. (Interview, February 1, 2021)

Evan emphasized how his role required support and presence to symbolically, rather than necessarily substantively, support teachers. He continued:

> And really being clear what expectations are, I think, and expectations— not in the sense of supervision or but, like, 'Hey, you know, I trust you to make a decision. Here's the expectation of how to engage in that decision,' right? And leaving the experts to do what they've been trained to do. (Interview, February 1, 2021)

Evan acknowledges teachers' professional capacity to make decisions. However, he holds an expectation regarding *how* teachers should approach specific issues. This somewhat

contradictory sentiment indicates that teachers as experts can be trusted to follow the expectations set out by administrators, rather than trusted to approach decisions of their own accord.

Evan's approach to scheduling illustrates a more hierarchical approach to leadership. He described setting a specific block in which teachers could schedule their instruction:

> So, our core instructional block really happens between the hours of 8:30 and 11:30. And so, within those minutes, primary — there's a slight difference with our primary grades and our intermediate, so you'll see a slight little like overlap within, you know, K-2 and then 3-5. But the majority of the instruction, like the core instruction, so you see all our kids have access to that during that time, right. And so, that's primarily our math and literacy. (Interview, February 1, 2021)

Evan's interview took place after a school-wide shift to ensure that 11:30 to 12:30 was a shared time for students to have lunch and recess together. This shift happened after a parent voiced a need to have their children on the same lunch and recess schedule. Interestingly, family interest shaped both Nigel's approach and Evan's approaches. However, as Nigel did so proactively, general education schedules remained constant throughout the year. By contrast, Evan reactively shifted schedules when parents offered feedback of their own accord.

Focal Teachers

My study centers two focal special education teachers: Greta at Bradbury and Brenda at Thompson. During the study, they engaged in work typical of pre-COVID schooling, including: providing instruction, meeting with other teachers, holding IEP meetings, and planning. The COVID-19 pandemic also required additional work. As a result of limited hours for instruction, special education teachers adapted students' IEPs to reflect instructional modifications through

Prior Written Notice (PWN) forms. These adaptations mostly consisted of decreased hours of instruction and, in some cases, eliminating specific types of instruction. Special education teachers edited these forms a second time when students returned to school in the spring. Further, Greta completed paperwork from district and state entities regarding additional services students might need to support budget and staffing projections. Both Brenda and Greta also administered surveys to families regarding whether or not they intended to return to school in order to inform staffing decisions. As described herein, overlapping policy and school contexts shaped how these special education teachers approached these tasks.

Brenda

Brenda was a White woman in her 35th year of teaching at the time of study. Though thirteen of these years were spent as a regular education teacher, Brenda had experienced the vacillations of nearly four decades of evolving special education policy and guidance. She started as a teacher who specialized in "Cognitive Disabilities," as they were referred to at the time, and had a self-contained classroom in which she worked with students profoundly impacted by disabilities including autism and Down Syndrome. The model shifted to a more inclusive approach to education in which students with disabilities received fewer services outside of the classroom and more services in the same setting as general education peers. Per Brenda's perspective, this shift functioned as "inclusion for the sake of inclusion" and did not substantively address the needs of her students. She then shifted from the secondary level into a role as a "Learning Disabilities" teacher at an elementary school. After over a decade in that role, Brenda then transitioned into a general education teacher role for 14 years and worked in several Firglade schools. She returned to special education as a cross categorical teacher a few years before this study when her principal requested she do so to fill a shortage of special education

teachers. She summarized, “I have come full circle, and I will probably finish my career in special ed, which most of the time I would say it’s a pretty good gig.” (Interview, October 7, 2020)

Greta

Greta, a White woman in her early thirties, held her teaching license for twelve years and was in her sixth year at Bradbury. After failing to find employment in a neighboring state, she applied to teach summer school at Butler, another elementary school in Firglade. From that position Greta transitioned into a long-term substitute special education job at Butler. However, as Greta was among the least senior teachers at the school, she was surplussed at the end of the school year when the Butler’s staff allocation decreased. Greta chose to teach summer school again and she ended up assigned to work at Bradbury where she then took an opening as a cross categorical teacher. She described an appreciation for her students, but a distaste for the bureaucratic aspects of special education. She said, “It's so rewarding to see, the past couple of weeks two different students have come to school that I've had over the years. And just to see them now, I'm like, ‘Oh, my gosh, I can't even believe this is you.’” Later in her interview, Greta summarized, “I love the kids, I hate the paperwork.” (Interview, November 16, 2020)

Candid Reflections on Site Selection

Site selection was, in short, a beast. I initially reached out to Firglade in May 2019 for research approval and was promptly rejected. Mostly undeterred, I emailed neighboring Meadowview in July, received my first non-automated email reply in August, met with staff members expressing increasing enthusiasm in September and November, and was abruptly denied access in December. I shifted my focus back to Firglade, cashing in the social network chips I’d hoarded over the course of my graduate student career for a meeting with the director

of special education. After a conversation regarding the details of this project and how it intersected with district concerns and another round of paperwork, I received initial district approval for my dissertation work in Firglade on March 5th, 2020.

A week later, we shuttered our collective doors in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools were closed entirely for several weeks followed by a transition to remote instruction. Given the unprecedented situation and the stress among educators, I didn't think it was appropriate or practical to push forward as I had planned. My project was further delayed. My partner bought a Nintendo switch and I divided much of my attention for the following three months among an ongoing game of Zelda and a newfound urge to convert scrap wood into a bike shed. Come June, I tentatively started to reach out to principals at schools identified by Firglade's Director of Student Services as fitting the description of schools I wished to study—some emails went unanswered, some principals replied, yet only Thompson agreed to move forward. Given the challenges and uncertainty of schooling during the pandemic, I felt gratitude and relief that my study would move forward in some form or another.

I struggled to find a second site through November, when I decided to reach back out to Bradbury. I conducted my master's research at Bradbury, had substitute taught there throughout the years, and—most importantly—taught there as a special education teacher for two years. Though Bradbury fit the description of the kind of school I was interested in studying, I initially wanted my second study site to be a place where I hadn't had prior contact. In addition, I hoped the findings from my prior work at Bradbury could serve as a third source from which to triangulate my findings for this study. In hindsight, however, I wished I had contacted Bradbury earlier, as the existing relationships I had with staff members facilitated candid dialogue and participation from people across a range of roles. I discuss this in greater detail, below.

Data Collection

As I awaited access, I continued collecting and analyzing documents from district, state, and federal sources to ascertain how priorities at these levels relate to special education. These documents included IDEA, district and state budgets, state-wide special education bulletins, and special education-related decisions from Supreme Court cases, such as *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (2017). To analyze these data, I created a spreadsheet in which I briefly summarized each document and included aspects of special education to which the document refers that were salient to my study, such as "free and appropriate education" and "paraprofessionals." To interrogate the priorities from these varied sources, I then created a comparative matrix to identify places of consensus and incoherence across these documents (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). While this document analysis comprised a portion of my data collection, it also provided an opportunity to triangulate participant claims as collected through observations and interviews (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010).

Fieldwork included observations, interviews, and school-based document analysis to capture perceptions and practices from the micro- to the macro-level (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Overall, I conducted 26 interviews and over 144 hours of observations (Table 2). I approached each focal teacher as a separate analytical case to identify the instances in which they applied personal discretion and examined how their differential professional experiences mediated their iterations of policy enactment (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). My documentation of ground-level policy enactment provided a rich foundation from which to illustrate the practical outcomes that are shaped by actors at the meso- and macro-levels.

Table 2
Data Collection

	Bradbury	Thompson	Additional
Interviews (26)	• Focal special education teacher (3 interviews) • Principal • Special education program support teacher • Four additional special education teachers • School psychologist • Speech and language pathologist • School social worker • Third grade teacher	• Focal special education teacher (3 interviews) • Principal • Special education program support teacher • Additional special education teacher	• District director of student services • State director of special education • Executive director of special education advisory non-profit • Two parents of students with disabilities
Observations (144.5 hours)	• Focal special education teacher (82 total hours) • Individualized education program meetings (2 hours) • Special education team meetings (4 hours) • School administrative meeting with assistant director of student services (1 hour	• Focal special education teacher (51 total hours) • Special education team meeting (1 hour)	• State Superintendent's special education conference (3.5 hours)

I conducted three semi-structured interviews with each participating special education teacher over the course of the 2020-2021 school year to identify the elements that shape their work and their use of discretion. The first interview focused on practitioner background, the structure of special education programming within participants' schools, and the structural elements that supported or constrained their work. This interview provided a space to build rapport, gain insight into how the daily work of participants is structured, and identify areas for further analysis. Through the second interview and during observation "down time," I asked

teachers about their decision-making in the lessons that I observed, with specific attention to instructional approaches and how teachers addressed obstacles that arose during their lessons. This strategy provided insight into how broader elements shape teachers' practice in subtle ways. The final interview elicited practitioner narratives of the role that macro-level elements, including state budgets and federal policy, played in shaping their work and how they felt that special education programming could be improved. These questions illuminated how practitioners positioned themselves and their work in relation to contexts outside of their schools. Throughout interviews, I asked participants to respond to questions of their teaching practice before the pandemic and during the pandemic to distinguish perennial issues from those challenges borne of COVID-19. Interviews also provided a space to interrogate elements of interest that arose throughout data collection.

I also observed each special education teacher over five week-long periods in their remote instructional environment. Observation periods for each teacher were scattered over the course of the school year, rather than conducted consecutively, to highlight changes in instruction, responsibilities, and school format as the year progressed. I logged more observational hours at Bradbury than at Thompson as Greta had two general education instructional periods to support, whereas Brenda only had one (see chapter three). Further, my relationship with Bradbury facilitated increased access to planning and IEP meetings relative to my access at Thompson.

During observations I focused on how context and practitioner discretion shaped special education teachers' engagement in their work. I used a tailored observation log to capture salient details and provide a consistent format through which to later analyze these data. These observations also functioned to triangulate the assertions of staff regarding the various influences

on their work (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010) and provided an opportunity to identify additional elements that impacted the work of special education teachers.

To understand how other school-based elements shaped special education teachers' enactment of policy, I extended my data collection to other practitioners within the school context. I interviewed school-based special education directors and principals, focusing on professional roles, policy understandings, work-related resources, and professional priorities in light of COVID-19. These interviews served to further triangulate and contextualize the experiences of special education teachers (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010), provide insight into the roles of other school level professionals in special education policy enactment, and offer different perspectives regarding school-level priorities. I also interviewed two parents, one from Firglade and one from a nearby city, to gain insight into how the challenges and experiences of families intersected with those of special education teachers.

The final portion of data collection extended to the Firglade district and the state in which Firglade is situated. I interviewed the district special education director, a director of non-profit special education advocacy group, and the state director of special education to understand the influence on policy enactment exerted by these professionals. These interviews focused on participants' work responsibilities, their priorities in relation to special education, and their decision-making processes. In addition to contextualizing the experiences of special education teachers, information gleaned from these interviews provides insights into which elements of special education are prioritized outside of schools and how this prioritization happens.

I assumed a constructivist stance throughout data collection and analysis, as I recognize that I cannot fully extricate my positionality from the data. My prior employment as a special education teacher at Bradbury yielded benefits in access as earlier described and familiarity with

some of the school's organizational dynamics, such as the structure of special education programming in the school and Nigel's approach to leadership. Yet this relationship also held the potential to obstruct my perception of relevant data. I did not want my familiarity with school staff to result in an overtly rosy assessment of practice, nor did I want to shoehorn the testimonies of my participants into a narrative related to my pre-existing experiences. Further, though my experience as a special education teacher was one of limited resources and managed chaos, I aimed to remain open to the experiences of the special education teachers I observed both at Bradbury and Thompson. To mitigate the influence of my perspective, I conversed with my participants throughout data collection to ensure that my notes reflected their lived experiences rather than a superimposition of my perspective onto their work.

Candid Notes on Data Collection

I get out of bed a few minutes after my partner, who is already preparing to teach 7th grade language arts from the corner of our bedroom. I start the coffee and by the time the eggs are ready, she's dressed and we're listening to NPR at the kitchen table. It rarely feels good, getting caught up on current events, but it feels worse to be out of the loop and unprepared for whatever is to come next. The cat whines for his daily walk, which is the only time I go outside some days. I wave at the neighbors, avoid the porch with the hostile tom cat, look at the marks that my boots and my cat's feet leave in the snow.

We come inside, and the workday unceremoniously commences. Everything I've read about working during the pandemic says to get dressed! Shower every day! Schedule your workday! But I barely did any of that before the pandemic, so I put on a monochrome sweatshirt to feign professionalism and cover my pajamas. On interview days, I swap the sweatshirt for my work sweater, differentiated only by its blue knit and level of relative cleanliness. I turn on my

video well ahead of observation time and, as well as my lamp to obscure the bags under my eyes. They aren't from lack of sleeping—there is a lot of respite in sleep during this time period—but instead the lingering effects of sustained screen time and abundant uncertainty.

Virtual data collection holds some advantages for interviewing participants. In addition to limiting travel time, my participants and I each decide which space is most comfortable for us to have our discussion (within the limits of pandemic possibilities, of course). I have my interview protocol up on the same screen as my participant's video and flow from question to question. I'm on my own turf, which makes me feel slightly more secure and less small when interviewing my participants; though I miss out on sharing a room with the people on which this project hinges. Conversations get streamlined as we try to convey our important points before the internet gets choppy. We speak past each other, miss jokes, and set the scene for countless aphorisms equating internet connection with human connection.

Observing virtual instruction is a peculiar thing. As opposed to knocking on a door to announce my arrival or ensure that I'm in the right space, I click on a Zoom link. When I'm invited to a breakout room, I click to enter. There is no peeking through a window to know who waits on the other side. My participant? A pair of teachers? A group of students?

Sometimes, I unknowingly wait at the virtual equivalent of a locked, empty, or unused room. In one instance, the Zoom link is a holdover from a "dead" schedule and is no longer in use. In another instance, a student's family members and I miss an IEP meeting as temporary district-level settings prohibit Zoom access to users on non-Firglade-disseminated devices. Another time, a teacher emailed text that said "Classroom Zoom link" but failed to include the actual hyperlink to their room. Overall, I miss approximately six hours of observation time due to such mishaps.

I rely on teachers to let me into their rooms, and they also actively need to bring me with them when moving to breakout rooms. Someone has to assign me to the same room as the teacher I'm observing, lest I be left in main room purgatory with the other black boxes. Sometimes people forget to bring me. Sometimes, another staff member is supposed to assign me, but they're teaching and can't prioritize it. Sometimes, I find myself "left alone" in Zoom rooms with students while teachers check on students working in other breakout rooms. The labor of having a virtual observer for teachers is distinct from ensuring I have a chair in the corner of their resource room.

Students don't notice me most of the time—my black video square is one of several sitting in the corner of their "classroom" screen with a name written across it in white text. I keep my video off during instruction as not to burden their WIFI with another pixelated expression and to minimize distractions to instruction. Students still occasionally privately message me in the chat—"Hi. Who r u. ????? ?????" Or, as is more frequent in small groups, they ask the teacher I'm shadowing, upon which I turn my screen on and give a brief introduction. Once students leave, I turn my camera on to ensure my participants that I'm there, I'm listening, I appreciate their vulnerability, I'm not solely a voyeur.

I get up to stretch when I want, with my headphones carrying the day's instruction to my ears as I grab a snack and pet the cat. I don't worry that the scratch of my chair will cause students' heads to turn or that my knock on the door will disrupt the teacher's instructional flow. I loudly clack away on my keyboard, inserting my notes directly into a word document rather than laboriously deciphering my chicken scratch and translating ink-based acronyms from a notebook page.

The content of my field notes takes on a different shape than those I've written during in-person observations. I replace the classroom description with snippets of participant backgrounds—backlighting from a kitchen, the repetitive "bleep" of a failing smoke alarm battery in someone's apartment. The instructional space doesn't have walls to display student artwork or anchor charts; rather, it's comprised by a screen that shifts between as much of the day's lesson as a computer display can fit and a rotating gallery view of students logging in and out of attendance. My field notes capture more extensive dialogue, as—in lieu of the body language and physical cues they employ in a physical space—teachers rely more heavily on verbal cues to teach and redirect students in the virtual context. At times, I rely on this dialogue to extrapolate the responses that students have privately messaged their teacher in the chat.

Occasionally, I vanish. My internet quality is also lacking, and I'm booted out of observations ten or so times over the course of data collection. Sometimes I can reconnect, and whoever admits me can shepherd me to the breakout room in which I'm supposed to observe. Twice, my partner also has connectivity issues, and her classroom of middle schoolers takes priority over my observation. Other times, my internet quality is fine, but the key stroke intended for my field notes accidentally closes a Zoom window and I must click my way back through the labyrinth.

Virtual data collection is a challenging task. Collecting data during a pandemic, when America is reaping a particularly noxious crop of fascism, distrust, violence, from its most recently sown seeds of White supremacy is a difficult, exhausting, and at times joyless task. I struggled with what it meant to research schools, which so frequently reproduce the dogmatic ideologies and systemic inequities repeatedly laid bare during the pandemic. Yet, the nimbleness and doggedness of some of my participants also provided a glimmer of hope, and a

glimpse at the resources we can apply to reimagining schools in progressive and pragmatic ways.

Data Analysis

Data analysis and interpretation took place iteratively throughout and following the data collection process. After individual observations and interviews, I engaged in memoing to document salient features that I identified during the day and how to best direct my study, as well as to facilitate reflexive practice (Saldaña, 2016). This memoing provided a space to identify emerging patterns within individual cases, within schools, across schools, and across the broader contexts that envelope special education. Further, through memoing, I tested burgeoning theories and explored unexpected patterns.

In subsequent stages of data analysis, I conducted within-case analysis of interviews and observation field notes followed by cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006). Within-case analysis supported the identification of individual participant's patterns and practices, whereas cross-case analysis facilitated syntheses of these data toward a broader understanding of the elements that shaped individual enactments of special education policy. I drew upon structural codes informed by my conceptual and methodological frameworks (see Sample Codes), including practitioner policy enactment and influences on special education in practice (teacher, school, district/state, sociopolitical) to explore policy relationships between varying actors (Saldaña, 2016). I developed a comparative matrix to record similarities and variations across cases and contexts as focused by these structural codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

I then referenced policy and program documents to connect the work and perceptions of practitioners to iterations of policy codified in text. Drawing on my established document analysis matrix, I examined how practical enactments of policies did or did not reflect the

priorities of these documents. I then drew on observational and interview data to contrast how teachers, school staff, and administrators differently engaged with policy. This process highlighted how and why some policies better resemble their initial conception in practice while others take new forms or do not touch practice at all. It also created a space to ascertain how the goals embedded in these documents interacted with the COVID-19 context.

I wrote analytic memos throughout the coding process to ascertain connections between codes, provide a space for reflexivity regarding my personal relationship to the data, and justify my choice of codes, particularly during inductive coding (Saldaña, 2016). By documenting these decision-making processes throughout my research, I created a clear trail through which I challenged my assumptions about data and ultimately built a stronger foundation from which to draw conclusions. I also constructed a concept map to visually organize the relationships between actors at various levels for analysis (Saldaña, 2016).

Chapter 3

Winnowed and Constrained: FAPE Across Scales and In Context

> And there is no routine to anything. It's constantly shifting and changing because of the district, because of the school, because of the regular ed staff, because of kids' computer issues, because of families, because of engagement, you know, like nothing is the same ever. And it just keeps—and as soon as I think, 'Okay, wait, I've got a plan,' then there's some kind of a change that happens. [Brenda, Interview, January 20, 2021]

Providing a "free, appropriate public education" (FAPE) to students with disabilities is the core work of special education teachers under federal law (IDEA, 2004). FAPE encompasses the entire school-based educational experience of a child with disabilities, including specially designed instruction and related services provided by special education teachers, therapists, and paraprofessionals as well as general education instruction provided by grade level teachers (unless explicitly specified in a child's IEP). Access to the general education curriculum and the settings in which students with disabilities receive instruction relate immediately to FAPE, though are subjectively enacted by special education teachers and district administrators (Ruppar, Allcock & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2017; Bray & Russell, 2018). Actors drawing upon the aforementioned logic of compliance prioritize policy adherence over substantive change when addressing racial disproportionality citations in schools (Voulgarides, 2018). Subjective and, at times, inadequate enactments of IDEA more broadly are thus facilitated and/or foiled by contexts beyond the classroom.

In this chapter, I draw on document analysis, interviews, and observations to argue that actors across federal, state, and local contexts differentially emphasized what FAPE entailed and who was responsible for its provision. Federal guidance spoke to the role of state and local agencies in providing FAPE, state guidance cited the role of district agencies, and a district agency asserted that FAPE was ultimately the purview of special education teachers. In this way, these entities *funneled* responsibility for FAPE to special education teachers. Distinct from bridging, which requires active agreement, funneling refers to entities passive conduction of policy. Though federal and state actors recognized FAPE as including students' broader educational program, district and school entities *narrowed* policy by prioritizing specially designed instruction provided by a special education teacher over general education instruction amid logistical complications wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Contextual variations—including scheduling practices, caseloads, and instructional formats—informed how special education teachers engaged with their responsibilities; however, in keeping with street-level bureaucracy (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977), special education teachers also referenced their professional understandings and personal priorities when determining their responses. Special education teachers generally responded to vacillations in their working conditions by acting as street level bureaucrats and rationing their temporal resources. They did so by tightening control over the instructional time that students were most likely be in attendance, a practice that tended to prioritize specially designed instruction over the broader general education program that comprised FAPE. Conditions of remote instruction further complicated special education teachers' capacities to deliver instruction.

In what follows, I describe policy messages from various entities about meeting FAPE provisions during COVID-19 and examine the local factors that resulted in special education

teachers enacting this limited version of FAPE. I highlight similarities and differences in challenges that teachers faced amid the COVID-19 pandemic and how these responses impacted FAPE in practice. I draw on policy documents, interviews with district and state administrators, and interviews and observations of focal special education teachers.

Federal Government: FAPE as All-Encompassing and Everyone Else's Responsibility

As schools closed in response to the advance of COVID-19, the federal government emphasized that schools remained responsible for the provision of FAPE. As infection rates escalated and schooling moved to virtual modalities in March 2020, and the federal government offered the following guidance regarding district obligations to students with disabilities:

> School districts must provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals providing education, specialized instruction, and related services to these students. In this unique and ever-changing environment, OCR [Office for Civil Rights] and OSERS [Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative services] recognize that these exceptional circumstances may affect how *all* educational and related services and supports are provided, and the Department will offer flexibility where possible. However, school districts must remember that the provision of FAPE may include, as appropriate, special education and related services provided through distance instruction provided virtually, online, or telephonically. (United States Department of Education, 2020a)

Herein, the federal government emphasized that districts remain responsible for FAPE. The federal government, as conveyed through this policy, argued that practitioners require some level of latitude and flexibility to best tailor educational programs to suit each student and in accordance with their IEP. However, this bulletin provided minimal guidance as to how

practitioners might approach the unprecedented circumstances wrought by the pandemic. For example, despite asserting the viability of remote learning for delivering FAPE, this bulletin did not explicate how practitioners could do so without universal internet or computer access among households. This guidance conveyed the expectation that schools would serve students remotely without guidance on how this education could be made appropriate.

After several months, OSEP issued additional documents intended to guide the provision of IDEIA amid the pandemic. These guidelines addressed the use of previously allocated federal funds (United States Department of Education, 2020b) and procedural safeguards (United States Department of Education, 2020c). While they granted some flexibility regarding use of funding streams and the acceptance of digital signatures for IEPs, the government remained steadfast in their assertion that FAPE remain intact. Government entities did not request that any portion of FAPE—specially designed instruction, related services, access to the general curriculum—be prioritized over other portions, nor did they provide additional resources for meeting FAPE. A September statement acknowledged the variety of models that schools had adopted in response to the pandemic, ranging from in person to hybrid to remote models. However, OSEP maintained that "that no matter what primary instructional delivery approach is chosen, SEAs [State Educational Agencies], LEAs [Local Educational Agencies], and individualized education program (IEP) Teams remain responsible for ensuring that a free appropriate public education (FAPE) is provided to all children with disabilities" (United States Department of Education, 2020d). In addition to preserving FAPE in its entirety, this statement emphasized education federalism and the continued responsibility of state, district, and local actors in providing FAPE.

State Department of Education: FAPE as All-Encompassing and Districts' Responsibility

The state department of education followed the government's lead, fleshing out guidance

in response to the evolution of the pandemic. State communication similarly described FAPE as comprising a student's broader educational program. Information from the state department of education focused on the variety of environments in which schools could serve students with disabilities during the pandemic. The state education department communicated such expectations through state-wide bulletins and emails to district administrators. For example, an email from the state director of special education read:

> While most students are able to receive FAPE effectively through distance learning options, some students with disabilities are not. These students are not able to make the required progress toward their IEP goals and *in the general education curriculum* solely through distance learning. Consequently, some students with disabilities require instruction, related services, or both, in-person, in order to receive FAPE as required by both state and federal law. This is regardless of the manner in which instruction is being offered to the general school population. (Email from State Director to District Administrators, November 20, 2020, emphasis added)

The state government echoed the federal government, emphasizing that FAPE is required for students with disabilities amid the pandemic and encouraging schools to do so within varied environments. This bulletin further highlighted students' rights to the general education curriculum that may comprise part of FAPE yet did not provide guidance as to how districts could do so.

The state director of special education acknowledged the role of the state department of education as a conduit for federal policy. In an interview, she described how the state responded to evolving guidance amid COVID-19.

> [I]n March, things just snowballed so quickly. So, we worked really closely with the Federal Department of Education on any guidance that they were providing. It was really clear really early that IDEA requirements were not going to be waived. And so, it's been a little bit of a challenge being at the state department, because we had to enforce and relay this messaging that IDEA requirements to provide FAPE have not been waived […] So, we provided—we just kind of cranked out the guidance and have been adding to, as the situation evolved, we've continually added to our guidance. (Interview, 2/16/21)

In describing her office's role, this administrator frames her work as delivering federal expectations to local agencies. However, she also acknowledges their role in further developing guidance in response to the evolution of the pandemic.

State administrators disseminated this guidance through bulletins, emails, and a state-wide conference. In addition to describing the environments in which FAPE could be provided, the state department offered concrete examples of that which did or did not comprise FAPE. Akin to the federal government, however, the state did not provide explicit guidance on how to navigate ground level challenges that disrupted FAPE, including scheduling and technological access. Instead, the state facilitated workshops among district administrators. As the State Director of Special Education described:

> We shifted a lot of how we work with districts to provide online communities of practice on kind of —and we would take topics, we would solicit topics from districts to say, 'What do you need here?' And then we — for some of the community of practice meetings we bring in experts, or we would just kind of allow — we give a presentation and then allow for networking and problem solving with, 'How are you doing this in your district? How are you making this work? Here's the requirements or the overarching

> messaging from [state department] requirements and the recommendations, and then how are y'all making it work?' We provided a lot of those opportunities. (Interview, 2/16/21)

While this excerpt indicates sensitivity to the needs of specific localities, it also places the onus on districts to develop solutions to instructional complications rather than providing scaffolds or options from the state level. This challenge was heightened by differential resources available to localities.

The state echoed the federal government in describing FAPE as encompassing specially designed instruction as well as students' general education program. Though the state provided a framework for delivering FAPE, actors at this scale deferred to localities regarding the actual provision of this programming. This mapped on to a broader culture of local control for school districts to cater to the unique needs of their populations. Additionally, while state entities continued to develop guidance regarding FAPE as the situation evolved, they also emphasized the responsibility of district administrators in navigating this unfamiliar terrain.

Firglade: FAPE as District or Teacher Responsibility?

At the district level, Firglade's administrator assumed more responsibility for the provision of FAPE. He described his orientation toward policy in an interview, noting:

> So, our guidance, you know, clearly you don't want to be deviating from the U.S. Department of Education or OSEP, Office of Special Ed Programs, or [state department of education]. So yes, I think that we certainly drew heavily on their framework for how to create— what their basic guidance is. But at that level, I mean, they're not getting down into the nitty-gritty. So, they share like conceptually, 'this is basic guidance.' And it's our job then to put some more specificity and … the processes and the practices aligned to kind of the overall … theoretical framework of their recommendations.

(Interview, 3/17/21)

This administrator acknowledged the need for specificity and asserted that it is the role of the district to interpret and administer federal policy. He referenced state and federal recommendations as a framework, which opens FAPE up for interpretation to a greater degree, and he indicated his understanding that ground-level practitioners are the arbiters of what does or doesn't align with this framework.

The district disseminated guidance regarding practice to teachers through monthly professional development opportunities for special education teachers and monthly meetings between the assistant director of special education and school principals. However, district communication to families indicated that special education teachers were responsible for creating these processes and practices. For instance, a district FAQ for families read:

> Q: I have an IEP. What accommodations and supports can I expect?
>
> A: Your Special Education case manager will review your IEP and communicate with your family/you about the supports that best further your progress on your IEP goals as much as possible during this time. Services will be adjusted based on what can be provided through virtual learning options. (District website, April 22, 2020)

In addition to highlighting the role of special education teachers in determining services, this document also conveys the district priority to provide almost exclusively virtual instruction. Further, the district remained guarded in communicating what students would actually receive and thus the extent to which FAPE would be realized. While a district letter cannot outline the individualized services for each student, this communication notably doesn't speak to specific instructional categories and supports or opportunities for families to contribute to the adjustment of services. Though the provision of FAPE continued to be honed by the Firglade district, the

responsibility for its enactment was passed down to teachers.

Teachers: FAPE as Specially Designed Instruction

Left to decide how to achieve mandated FAPE in the midst of a pandemic, school level practitioners prioritized specially designed instruction for individual students rather than access to general education instruction and activities. I argue that this prioritization compromised the provision of FAPE. School schedules, shifting caseloads, and elements of virtual learning, such as shifts in instructional format and student absences born of technological malfunctions, further shaped these fragmented attempts toward FAPE in practice. Both Greta and Brenda made varied attempts to adhere to FAPE by including broader parts of students' educational programs into their daily schooling experiences, but ultimately prioritized specially designed instruction over access to the general education curriculum.

Limited Time Due to Shifting Schedules and Caseloads

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, FSD shifted to a remote format in March 2020. Students logged on to Chromebooks remotely to participate in virtual, synchronous instruction with their teachers. Teachers also assigned work through online applications such as Lexia or Dreambox and platforms including Seesaw outside of synchronous instruction, though the expectations around actual student completion of this work vacillated. As opposed to the 7.5 hours in which students typically attended school in person, the remote school day for general education students comprised two hours to two and a half hours of synchronous instruction with grade level teachers. The timing of these blocks differed within each study site on a classroom-by-classroom basis and, in the case of Thompson, shifted over the course of the year. Special education teachers also shifted their instructional schedules in light of caseload variations and patterns in student attendance.

Brenda: Reactive Adaptations

Brenda experienced changes to her caseload and schedule over the course of the year because of student mobility, shifting SET capacities, and administrative decisions (Figure 1). At the outset of the school year, Brenda had 13 students on her case load across three third grade ELI and DLI classrooms. Her day started with check-ins with four students from 8:30 to 10:00, in which she previewed the day, discussed emotional regulation strategies, and developed relationships with these students. At 10:00, students had synchronous morning meeting with their general education teachers, and Brenda used that time to conduct assessments with students for reevaluations and IEPs. Synchronous group instruction took place from 10:30 to 12:30, during which Brenda worked with students with disabilities in separate breakout rooms to deliver specially designed instruction. Brenda then worked with a student from 1:00 to 1:30 outside of the synchronous group block. The remainder of her afternoon comprised various meetings with other teachers, save for 2:30 on Thursdays when she went into the building to work with a student in-person. The paraprofessionals with whom she worked remained online from 1:30 to 3:30 to support students with work completion, with one or two students attendings (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Focal Teachers November Instructional Schedules

	Brenda's November Schedule	Greta's November schedule
8:30	Student check-ins	Morning group meeting 1:1 with student
9:00		
9:30		Writing group
10:00	Morning meeting/ assessments	Math group
10:30	Small Instructional Groups	Dictated writing group
11:00		Social-emotional group
11:30		
12:00		
12:30		Afternoon group meeting
1:00	1:1 with student	Dictated writing group
1:30		Literacy group
2:00		Math group
2:30	In person student (Thursdays only)	Social-emotional group

*Shading designates overlap with synchronous general education instruction

When I spoke to Brenda in January, her principal, Evan, had shifted the broader school schedule in response to a parent complaint. Her caseload also changed. All classrooms in the school were newly required to have 11:30 to 12:30 free for students to have lunch and recess. General instruction now took place from 10:00 to 11:30, with students logging on for math from 12:30 to 1:30. Brenda shifted the schedules of the paraprofessionals with whom she worked and moved her virtual one-on-one student check-ins to a different time compensate for this change.

At this point in the school year, Brenda also took on a new student, a kindergartener who required in-person instruction for a half hour on Mondays and Thursdays. With this new student Brenda's caseload rose to 14. In her initial explanation of this shift, Brenda said:

> I got assigned a kindergartener that has autism, who is in the building, because when the virtual stuff was happening, she would just literally walk away from the screen, and she would do nothing. And she's five and she has autism and English is her second language. So, because I'm already coming into the building, I was assigned her. (Interview, January 20, 2021)

In this first excerpt, Brenda attributes the student assignment to her presence in the building, noting the role of logistics in determining her caseload. Later in the interview, Brenda framed this switch as driven by her COVID-19 risk relative to her coworkers, explaining:

> Her case manager is pregnant. She's delivering in February. And the other two special ed teachers have babies under a year. And they could be told, come in or take a leave. But instead, what's been, what has been decided in our building is that Laura [other special education teacher] and I just take them on. (Interview, January 20, 2021)

Brenda pointed to decisions outside of her control in both excerpts, initially noting that she "was assigned" the student based on "what has been decided" by other professionals. In her second excerpt, she alludes to a perceived unfairness in practices. Whereas other teachers could be held to their instructional responsibilities if told to "come in or take leave," Brenda suggests that the responsibility for working with these students was instead shifted to teachers already in the building without the input of these teachers.

Brenda previously reflected on how the change in scheduling and the consequent limited time she had for each student impacted her instruction. She noted:

> But the inequities are they're not accessing some of the regular instruction. Because we only have this much time [holds hands parallel and close together], you know? And so, in the classroom, [the students] would be a part of that regular ed instruction. I would

> parallel it, or they would be there, and an assistant would support them actually paying attention to it and learning it, whatever. We've been told special ed trumps [general education instruction]. So, if all they can get is your time, that's all they can get. (Interview, October 7, 2020)

In the final sentences of this quote, Brenda explains that the messaging she received from the district has been to first ensure that students receive the specially designed instruction as dictated per their IEP. However, in doing so, Brenda and the district undermined the access to general education instruction also required by student IEPs. By prioritizing provision of specially designed services as demanded by student IEPs, Brenda attenuated holistic aspects of FAPE.

In a later interview, Brenda provided an example of this in tradeoff. She described adjusting her schedule to prioritize specially designed instruction for one student over general education instruction for him in a specific time block:

> But I have three reading groups. So, I had to do one of the reading groups during the mini lesson and then share, I'll circle back into the mini lesson with [the student]. Because where was I going to fit those reading groups? (Interview, January 20, 2021)

While Brenda tried to balance student access to the general education curriculum, she ultimately prioritized specially designed instruction. Observations of Brenda's teaching confirmed her rationale. While she scheduled time in the morning for students to check in with her or work on instruction outside of the regular block, student attendance at these meetings varied. In light of this attendance issue, the bulk of specially designed instruction took place during general education time.

In our final interview, schools had returned to some in-person instruction. One of Brenda's third graders moved out of district, her kindergartener was reassigned to a new case manager, and she now took on two fourth graders to her caseload. She worked with students within the school building while also working with some students virtually. Her schedule included meeting a student with physical disabilities in the parking lot at the start of the day and weaving between four classrooms and virtual platforms to provide instruction with the students on her caseload through 2:30. Initially, the district attempted to limit the number of environments in which special education teachers could work to two by curbing the number of classrooms that these teachers serve. This created dilemmas for special education teachers with students across several grade levels and classrooms, and the guidance on environmental restrictions changed over time. Several participants attributed this shift to the realities of in-person instruction. This shift functioned as another factor with which special education teachers grappled when delivering FAPE as discussed below.

Greta: Greater Voice in Shifting to Individualized Instruction

Greta also experienced changes to her schedule and caseload, but the changes were far less disruptive. Moreover, unlike Brenda, Greta participated in grade-level team discussions and decisions and appeared to have greater voice over decisions. The changes to her schedule and caseload therefore generally made her work easier. Greta began the year with fourteen third graders and two first graders on her caseload. She primarily instructed third graders and planned instruction for a bilingual paraprofessional who worked with the first graders (see Chapter 4). Her grade level team decided to do two whole group instructional sessions a day, and families had their choice of sessions. Greta initially attempted to provide specially designed instruction for students during the block opposite of the whole group time in which they participated.

However, by the time of our first interview in November, she changed this strategy in response to student attendance patterns. As she described:

> The beginning of the year, I was trying to do groups opposite what their whole group time is. So, for example, if a student was on school from 8:30 to 10:30 doing their whole group instruction from the classroom teachers, I was trying to schedule their direct instruction in the afternoon to be opposite what they got. But what I was finding was that if I had a different time scheduled and a different link, there was maybe two out of ten kids that were actually coming to my extra groups, because like at seven and eight [years of age], it's just hard to keep track of what time it is on your own. And like I made schedules and stuff, but it was just not working. So then I switched it to-- I was going to do my groups during their whole group time. And I figured out ways to do that, or just stay on their Zoom. (Interview, February 3, 2021)

Greta described recognizing that students had trouble signing on to multiple instruction blocks, despite her attempts to make schedules for students with classroom Zoom links. In these instances, she prioritized her own specially designed special education instruction over general education instruction for her students. This practice limited student interactions with peers and general education teachers.

In addition to conducting small groups during whole group time, Greta also stayed on the Zoom call immediately following the end of general education synchronous block to run social emotional groups or deliver specially designed reading instruction. She described:

> I know the morning time is really long and it's a long time for some of those kids to stay on, but it's worked so far. I mean, they stay on, and they get silly and wiggly, but I can't blame them so we just try to power through. (Interview, November 16, 2020)

In this segment, Greta notes that the timing of instruction directly after the whole group lesson isn't optimal for students, as they get "silly and wiggly," and she references "power[ing] through" the instruction. Consistent with the logic of compliance, she frames specially designed instruction as something that must take place despite dwindling student capacities for engagement. When presented with the option of students not taking part in instruction at all versus being relatively distracted during instruction, she forged ahead with instruction. In observations, Greta continued working with students for up to an hour following the culmination of their general education group time to provide special education instruction.

While Greta was able to find additional time for specialized instruction, it wasn't enough to meet the services outlined in student IEPs. This time supplemented specially designed instruction that Greta provided in separate breakout rooms with students during general education time. Even though Greta and Brenda attempted to provide some level of instruction outside of general education classroom time, they lacked sufficient time to provide specially designed instruction without conflicting with students' access to broader general education programming.

When I spoke to Greta again in January, her schedule had mostly stayed the same. Unlike Brenda whose schedule changed mid-year, and Greta's principal asked teachers to determine schedules based on family feedback at the outset of the year. However, her caseload had changed as more third grade students qualified for special education. She was up to 18 students, all of whom were third graders. Her first graders had switched to another special education teacher's caseload to better distribute the workload among special education teachers. Upon our final interview, Greta had returned to school and navigated virtual and in-person instruction with students over the course of the school day. Two of her students only came in for a short time-

period—one in the morning and one in the afternoon—whereas the remainder of her students came in for the entire day. An element of Greta's work across virtual and in-person environments thus was creating instructional schedules that accounted for the varied needs of numerous students.

Without prompting during interviews, both teachers brought up the number of students on their caseloads relative to general education teachers. High caseloads for special education teachers were an issue both before and during the pandemic. Greta noted, "The number of third graders I have with an IEP are more than I could have in a classroom right now because we can only have like 12 kids in a class." Greta had 18 students on her caseload at this point. Similarly, Brenda mentioned in regard to her third-grade team, which includes two grade level teachers, "The one team I'm on has 29 kids. And this happened last spring, too, that my caseload is the same or higher than the regular ed teachers I'm working with. Like last year, I had 14 kids virtually when [teacher] had nine." Brenda had a caseload of 14 students relative to her general education colleagues' classes of 14 and 15.

These comparisons suggest that Brenda and Greta see their work with students with disabilities as fundamentally more intensive than their general education peers and thus their heavier or equal "caseloads" as inappropriate and unfair. Though high caseloads had previously impacted Firglade teachers (Miesner, 2021), the differential requirements for serving students with disabilities versus students without disabilities during the pandemic brought this issue to the foreground. Research on special education teachers' experience during COVID highlight the anxiety, stress, and burnout experienced by staff in this role (Comier, McGrew, & Ruble, 2021). My findings here indicate that special education teachers who examine their situations in comparison to general education teachers may find even more reasons to feel dejected by their

working conditions. They are beholden to strict legal guidelines, albeit with limited guidance and seemingly fewer avenues for control over their circumstances.

In sum, Brenda and Greta had different options through which to enact FAPE owing to their different schedules and their different caseloads. While aforementioned scheduling approaches which prioritized family responsiveness and teacher autonomy allowed general education teachers to have varied levels of flexibility in scheduling instruction and families to better meet demands of remote instruction, they also resulted in a lack of consistency from classroom to classroom. As special education teachers frequently served students across multiple classrooms, these approaches created additional logistical considerations for special education teachers who were planning their instructional schedules. Both teachers faced shifts to their caseloads and schedules, in part due to adjustments required from navigating a new system of remote instruction and eventually a return to in-person instruction for the entire school district. However, caseload and scheduling shifts were more disruptive for Brenda, who navigated virtual and in-person environments, a mid-year scheduling change, and the expansion of her caseload from 13 third graders, to 13 third graders and a kindergartener, to 12 third graders and two fourth graders. By contrast, following the shift that Greta chose to make at the outset of the year, her virtual instruction schedule remained relatively consistent. Further, the shifts that Greta experienced within her caseload served to simplify, rather than complicate, her workload by minimizing the number of different environments in which she was required, despite an overall increase in the number of students she served. Ultimately, both teachers chose to pull students out from general education instruction to provide special education services, resulting in limited access to general education content for some students. Though Brenda and Greta experienced these challenges differently, they reacted by tightening control over the time students were most

likely be in attendance , a practice that aligned with district calls to prioritize specially designed instruction over the broader general education program that comprised FAPE.

Obstacles to Providing FAPE Through Remote Instruction

Remote instructional formats further complicated Brenda's and Greta's efforts to carry out the specially designed instruction they prioritized. Internet reliability and attendance, background environments, school-based Zoom conventions, and instructional materials comprised four intersecting domains that heavily informed remote instruction in practice. Though Brenda and Greta dealt with all these factors, they experienced different manifestations of challenges and, at times, determined different solutions as informed by their professional experiences and the contexts in which they worked.

Student Attendance Patterns and Instructional Disruptions

During the pandemic, students who have had virtual schooling have had uneven access to the internet and varying qualities of internet connection, with accessibility issues in Firglade especially impacting low-income students and students of color. In Firglade, one consequence of spotty internet was that some students could not hear instruction or would be "kicked off" of their internet mid-lesson. Focal special education teachers also struggled with internet or device related issues, spending parts of their day discussing connectivity issues with technology support staff at the district central office rather than planning instruction or collaborating. These disruptions limited the length and depth of instruction that special education teachers could provide. Greta explained:

> We definitely have some barriers with internet. I have definitely reached out to our librarian and requested probably six hotspots this year so far…. I don't know what it is, my theory is that in the morning, basically most of Firglade is on Zoom from 8:30 till

> 10:30 in some way. So, kids that live in apartments over by Bradbury, their internet is super glitchy in the morning and better in the afternoon. But I also think it's because so many kids are on Zoom at that time between elementary and middle and high school…. So I've requested hotspots for several kids to just help because it's really hard to do a reading group when like I am late -- they get me delayed and then they try to tell me something and it's super choppy and then they freeze and then disappear and then have to come back. So we've definitely had to deal with that issue. (Interview, November 16, 2020)

In addition to describing the interruptions borne of internet issues, Greta mentions requesting hotspots. The district offered to provide these devices to families that did not have internet access; however, the delivery of these devices was often delayed, and some families were deemed ineligible due to unpaid accounts. The internet interruptions also characterized Brenda's experience.

Remote instruction also differently shaped understandings of presence versus absence in the school day. As opposed to a physical school building in which special education teachers would generally know who was present or who would not be for upcoming interventions, student attendance in virtual schooling varied on a period-by-period and sometimes a minute-to-minute basis. As Brenda described:

> Something else that's tricky that I keep pushing about is the expectations, because you're marked present if you attend one Zoom or you do one assignment. But then there are all these assignments that are on the platform that kids could, should, might [do] that get data. So if somebody doesn't do anything but comes to one Zoom, I guess that's OK.

> How do I do IEP progress reports? And how do I say to parents, 'You got to get your kid on?' (Interview, October 7, 2020)

Brenda was distressed by varied attendance expectations and the consequent ramifications for students' IEP goals. In this segment, she attributes student attendance in part to parental roles. However, in questioning how to broach this subject with parents, she alludes to her understanding that parents are grappling with challenges beyond their students' attendance, as described further in the following section. As Brenda summarized one morning, upon hearing that two students could not access instruction because they were staying with different family members, "It's just such a crapshoot as far as who am I going to be able to see and what I'm really going to be able to accomplish." Uncertainty of attendance and challenges connecting with students hamstringed special education teachers' capacities to enact FAPE.

Observations of Brenda and Greta were frequently complicated by internet issues on the teacher or student side and, on occasion, by my own internet limitations as described in the methods chapter. Special education teachers responded to unexpected changes in student presence by constantly adapting the lessons they were delivering and accompanying instructional goals, which often limited the extent to which they could cover content. This practice is exemplified in an observation of Brenda, captured in my fieldnotes:

> Brenda supports two students in a pre-recorded general education math lesson from 9:00 to~10:00. The classroom teachers play the prerecorded lesson during whole group instruction time, but these students' families have noted that they are struggling to maintain attention in the afternoon, so Brenda does math with them in the morning. [Student 1] joins at 9:03, splitting their attention between the video, Brenda's prompts, and something off screen. At 9:15, [Student 2] joins and Brenda directs them to open

their math video—'Can you go into Seesaw and get your math open? I'll check in with you in a second.' — though it's hard for [Student 2] to hear over the math video that [student 1] is playing. This presents a challenge for Brenda, as she must balance math instruction between two students at different points within the same lesson, while both students have varying interaction with their screens/lesson.

The ensuing thirty minutes feature trouble shooting on a minute-to-minute basis—videos playing automatically and disrupting conversation; supporting students in finding assignments amid their virtual instruction dashboards; Brenda leaving the breakout room to ask the paraprofessional with whom she works to grant her screen sharing capabilities so she can help [Student 1] find their math assignment; doubling back to make sure [Student 2] is watching their video; coaxing students to return to their computers; student screens freezing and unfreezing.

At 9:47, [Student 2] leaves the breakout room for the main instruction room. Brenda leaves the breakout room to support [Student 2] right as [Student 2] immediately re-enters breakout room. [Student 2] can't share their screen, so Brenda pivots her instructional plan. She says, 'Ok for now, [Student 1] you're going to help me, we are going to do another problem together. Because what's important is that we do some thinking, and all these computer issues are making it hard.' As Brenda is explaining the math problem, both students leave their computers, 'And come on back, you both left!'

> [Student 2], who had left to get physical materials, returns to the screen. Brenda instructs them to use Seesaw to write down the directions for the problem, but the student says that they can't do it, alluding to technical issues. 'OK, tell me what to put down. Tell me the equation that matches this problem.' Brenda writes the equation on her shared 'whiteboard' screen as the student dictates it, chiming in with corrections and probing questions. At 9:53, the lesson has finally started rolling, with Brenda focused mainly on [Student 2] with occasional checks for understanding with [Student 1].
>
> Brenda dismisses students at 9:57 to sign-in to their general education Zoom room. After they leave, Brenda laments that today was just "insane" and says that at some point, she just had to choose to move forward with teaching however she could. She thinks that the reason that [Student 2] could not access their activity was that it was an assignment for today that was posted by grade level teachers yesterday. Sometimes, students will go into assignments and work on them without having heard the lesson first, so teachers lock the assignments to prevent this. They sometimes forget about [Student 1] and [Student 2] who do math in the morning, so the grade level teachers do not unlock the assignments in time for them. Brenda now is trying to figure out how to link the assignment that she did with the students on her account to their accounts, essentially how to put their names on the assignment. (Observation, January 12, 2021)

As evidenced in this excerpt, the comings and goings of students limited the extent to which Brenda could address instructional goals and ultimately provide FAPE. This highlights the trouble of having a single, shared screen through which to address the needs of two students when they come in at different points in the lesson. It also highlights the amount of coordination

required among adults to provide access to instruction—with Zoom meeting hosts granting screen share permissions and grade level teachers unlocking assignments. Instruction for students with disabilities required extra coordination; therefore, there were more opportunities for missed communication among adults that would impact this instruction. In addition to creating an obstacle for instruction, these events in other instances impacted special education referrals and progress monitoring which were also being conducted on Zoom, suggesting that the baseline against which FAPE for individual students was determined also lacked reliability.

Students, families, and teachers alike encountered further difficulties with Zoom links. After a second-quarter change in Zoom permissions on the district level, families (and researcher) who were not logging into school-hosted meetings on an FSD device could not access IEP meetings. Further, as teachers updated instructional schedules in response to caseload and school-wide scheduling shifts, students encountered broken, un-updated Zoom links and at times missed instruction as a result. These issues also impacted school staff, as evidenced by a paraprofessional waiting to be admitted for several minutes at an incorrect link before recalling that a new link had been created. Consequently, faults in the underlying mechanisms by which students, families, and teachers were supposed to access instruction created another obstacle that interfered with aspects of FAPE and IDEA more broadly, ranging from specially designed instruction to IEP meetings.

Vacillating student attendance meant that the composition of small instructional groups varied, in some cases from day to day and others minute by minute. These changes held practical implications for instruction. If students are frequently missing content, it became increasingly hard for teachers to ensure that students were on the same instructional page and required further differentiation of their lessons. These absences limited the extent to which students could access

FAPE even under ideal conditions.

Background Environments and Added Distractions

In addition to the virtual interface that constituted part of instructional environments, students and teachers accessed instruction from varied spaces. Some students accessed instruction from the homes of varied family members or friends, with some students regularly switching between these spaces. Other students attended an in-person day care through Supporting Firglade Schools (SFS), an independent entity that contracted with FSD to provide supervision for students in certain school sites. Another group of students accessed instruction en-route to various portions of their day, from cars on the way to daycare or while running errands with their family. While Kennedy (2006) documents the fluctuations that teachers manage in their daily work,, the everyday distractions of instructional settings were magnified within the virtual context and comprised an additional factor that teachers navigated amid virtual instruction.

Teacher practices shifted in response to student settings, as evidenced by the following instructional observation of Brenda one morning:

> Brenda is working one-on-one with a student who seems to be having a hard time focusing with their sibling in the background. Brenda asks the student if they can go to a different space away from their sibling and tries to problem solve with the student. Brenda asks, "Is there a space in your house where you can move away from [your sibling]?" and urges the student to ask an adult in the house for help.
>
> The student seems to be getting increasingly frustrated and Brenda says, "How are you going to solve it?" She then tries to relate to the student about the trickiness of having

> siblings before engaging another strategy. She says, “Another thing to do is to get your mind going somewhere else. Do you remember at school we used to notice? Like, I notice my cup. [...] What’s something you notice?” The student begins engaging in this refocusing activity with Brenda, who then says, “I notice that you must have moved to a place away from your sibling because I can’t hear their voice.” The sibling responds from off camera to counter Brenda’s assessment. After seven minutes of Brenda’s attempts to keep the student’s focus on her instead of their sibling, the student’s sibling goes to a different room and Brenda begins reading instruction. (Observation, November 2, 2020)

Brenda spent seven minutes of instructional time navigating the conflict between the student and their sibling. Though she engaged some social emotional strategies, which might comprise another portion of the student’s services, this time period was intended to be reading instruction. The instructional setting, over which Brenda and the student had limited control, resulted in shortening of actual instruction.

Brenda further described how the varied physical settings from which students joined shaped her instruction:

> The kids or parents that work and need to be at daycare, they’re in a—one group of kids was actually working in a gym that was their virtual learning classroom, and there’s a small number of kids, but the echoing everywhere. If you have a smaller place and you have several siblings that are on at the same time, if your microphone isn’t muted, we hear the sounds of the other classrooms. And it makes it hard for anyone else to hear. (Interview, October 6, 2020)

While background noise at first glance may seem like a trivial aspect of Zoom learning, it had a broad impact on instruction. Such distractions challenge the focusing capacity of children, which

may already be a challenge for some students in special education, and comprise predicaments (Cohen, 2011) that detract from instructional time.

Further complicating service provision was student engagement in remote instruction under the supervision of a non-profit organization. The district contracted Support for Firglade Schools (SFS) to provide afterschool supervision and activities at school sites for those students whose caregivers could not support them at home during the school day and successfully applied to attend. However, varied expectations between SFS and FSD schools, as well as some scheduling challenges, impacted teacher capacities to enact FAPE and, subsequently, student learning. Katie, a Bradbury special education teacher, explained the challenges of the SFS context:

> Bradbury['s SFS program] specifically had to close for two weeks because so many of the staff members tested positive for COVID. They went back for a week, and then the superintendent closed [SFS] for two weeks because of the Thanksgiving break. Then they went back for a week, and then it was two weeks of the winter break, but then the superintendent closed [SFS] for the week after break. So that's five weeks right there where these students weren't receiving their typical instruction because a lot of them -- like the two of my students out of the three who go are homeless and don't have Internet at the hotel that they're staying at. So they weren't logging on at all. So they missed five weeks of instruction because what they were told would be in-person program was continuing to be canceled, and that's going to continue to happen. (Interview, February 10, 2021)

Katie cites a confluence of factors that intersect at SFS to limit student access to FAPE. She notes that COVID infections impacted staff at SFS, forcing the site to close. She then notes that

the superintendent chose to close the SFS sites when schools remained in session, the week after Thanksgiving and the week after winter break, meaning that students who relied on these sites for internet could not access instruction. Though SFS was positioned as a space to support students amid the pandemic, COVID protocols and caution regarding COVID frequently left students who relied on this service in the lurch.

Brenda similarly described SFS-related closings and reliance at Thompson, as well as the ramifications for a student:

> [Student 1] is in SFS. And they have shut down a number of times, either because they had illness, or they shut down for two weeks after Thanksgiving and for a week after Christmas or winter break. And he doesn't come out if he's not at SFS. So there's these big chunks of time that we don't have [Student 1] and [Student 1] didn't have, he had some computer issues. He didn't have a computer for a while. His family is very mobile. They're not settled so there's constantly this thing about internet. And the reality is he's not on if he's not at SFS, but as you also noticed when he's at SFS, it's pretty challenging sometimes to talk to him, keep his attention. And he's in the middle of a re-eval. […] And [the student services team] are looking at him being distracted and ADHD. And I'm like, 'How can you, how can you say that?' Because I feel like he does fairly well, considering everything that's going on behind him. (Interview, January 20, 2021)

Brenda illustrated how variability in SFS impacted a specific student and noted that, in addition to difficulties in delivering instruction required by student IEPs, the virtual format and SFS setting complicated her ability to interpret student progress.

An additional complication was matching SFS instructional times with classroom instruction times. For Greta, the schedule of SFS for some students did not align well with

students' instructional schedules, resulting in one student missing the SFS recess to receive reading instruction during that time. This daily occurrence meant that the student was disappointed and less willing to engage in instruction as they were missing out on an opportunity to play and connect with peers. Though ultimately rectified so that the student could attend the morning instructional block, the prioritization of FAPE in this instance initially limited this eight-year-old's social opportunities in a time of particular stress and isolation.
Observations of teacher work with students in SFS were frequently interrupted by noise.

Brenda also spoke to how students' background environment complicated student privacy. She said:

> It's really interesting as well as far as confidentiality goes, with this whole Zoom thing. Like my [paraprofessional] on a whole classroom said to a kid, 'I missed you at check-in this morning.' And I'm like, 'No, you can't do that in front of the whole class. That singles him out in maybe a way that he doesn't want to be singled out.' Now granted in a classroom, if the PT shows up to take a kid, it's obvious that they have that need. We have a chance to kind of minimize that this way, because they don't know which breakout room who's in. They don't know who is split where and with who. And in the classroom, I worked with lots of kids. So it also, kids want to work with me sometimes that aren't even mine. (Interview, January 20, 2021)

In this segment, Brenda notes that her provision of FAPE through virtual means may conflict with confidentiality around student disability status. Whereas the in-person classroom held increased flexibility to mix groups of students with and without disabilities, aforementioned time constraints meant that paraprofessionals and special education teachers predominantly worked with students who had IEPs. Further, in addition to the classmates in front of whom the above

student is "singled out," there are also family members, neighbors, and other people in student environments who now have a view into the classroom space, its dynamics, and potentially can infer information regarding other students' disability statuses.

Differing School-based Zoom Practices

During the period of virtual instruction, the ubiquitous use of Zoom as a video conferencing platform differentially impacted how special education teachers enacted FAPE. As noted previously regarding their instructional schedules, both special education teachers delivered some specially designed instruction during general instruction time; however, differential teacher team practices regarding Zoom shaped the extent to which Greta and Brenda held control over the platform and, consequently, their delivery of specialized instruction. These variations compounded with technical difficulties and student attendance to impact FAPE in practice.

Greta and her grade level colleagues all were hosts of the Zoom meeting. As hosts, they could move students to varied breakout rooms, share their screens, and admit students into the Zoom classroom. Greta could actively create a breakout room and move students to this room to work with them. Further, the duration in which the breakout room remained open was at Greta's discretion, and she would dismiss students at different times depending on when they completed the assignment they were working on. Greta therefore held some amount of control over the time that she spent with students in breakout rooms and could adjust this time in light of her lessons.

By contrast, Brenda had significantly less control within Zoom. At Thompson, each grade level team had an additional adult assigned to moderate entrance to the Zoom. Consequently, the school social worker moderated entrance into Zoom rooms to avoid "Zoom

bombing." She and the grade level teachers largely placed students in and out of breakout rooms, requiring Brenda to message these hosts with her breakout room requests.

This arrangement further interfered with the extent to which Brenda could provide instruction. For example, during literacy time, instruction took the form of three rotations over the course of the hour. Students in the third-grade class would attend three separate breakout rooms over the course of the hour, in which they worked with different teachers on different skills. Students on Brenda's caseload attended a rotation with her rather than with a general education teacher.

Brenda had no control as to when her breakout room would end, and the duration of rotations varied daily. At some point during her lesson, a message would come out to all screens stating that there was one minute left for the breakout rooms to remain open. Following this, Brenda would hurriedly convey remaining information to her students, even as a notification indicating that breakout rooms would close within 30 seconds appeared on the screen and began counting down. She was unable to override this countdown and generally unable to predict when it would happen.

The virtual Zoom format impeded on instructional time in other ways. Brenda explained how logistics of navigating Zoom and difficulties accessing web-based resources shortened instructional time:

> There're some really nice apps out there. But then you have to get them to that app. And they have to bring the letters down. And when you have a 20-minute block, which is really only 15 minutes, because they have to go to the Zoom room, and then get put in breakout rooms, and then go back to the Zoom room to get put into different breakout rooms. The time is unbelievable. And then as you're teaching, they're getting kicked off

> of Zoom and coming back in or someone couldn't get in and they finally got in and they get in when you're 10 minutes in and you're using a manipulative. (Interview, October 7, 2020)

My observations of Brenda's instruction support her account. Over the course of observations, the longest block that Brenda had with students during this time was 16 minutes, whereas the shortest was 7 minutes. Interestingly, grade level teachers also included activities between groups that lasted 3-4 minutes (i.e. YouTube videos in which students spotted varied hidden pictures etc.) This may reflect a disconnect around instructional priorities or lack of communication between Brenda and her co-teachers—Brenda lamented the lack of instructional time that she had to work with students, whereas grade level teachers either felt comfortable with the limited time or felt that student engagement with non-instructional transition activities was more important than prolonged instructional time.

Materials Successes and Failures

The switch to Zoom instruction prompted an uptick in remote educational platforms. A stampede of invented compound words—Jamboard, Peardeck, Nearpod—entered teachers' and students' lexicons as schools attempted to facilitate remote instruction. Brenda prioritized virtual educational platforms whereas Greta relied more heavily on some physical materials, including pencils and curriculum-specific notebooks. These materials lent themselves to different opportunities for teachers to provide instructional feedback, but they also facilitated different types of instructional experiences for students with disabilities and facilitated different enactments of FAPE. Both teachers reported that planning for instruction took much longer as they grappled with how to modify instruction for this unfamiliar remote learning format.

Brenda provided background for her decision to use virtual platforms for instruction. She explained:

> Last spring, special ed did deliver a learning kit that had a whiteboard and markers and some different things in it. [Students] lost them, the markers ran out, you know, having reliable supplies in the homes of the kids I work with is challenging. (Interview, October 7, 2020)

Brenda referenced initially depending on physical materials to work with students, also noting that students would write words on whiteboards and hold them up to the screen for her to see. Yet, these materials were not "reliable," –in some cases reflecting student poverty-- and could not be depended on every class period, prompting Brenda to use virtual platforms over which she had more, though not entire, control.

Greta described the process of gathering and disseminating physical materials, as well as her rationale for using these:

> We as a third-grade team put together supply bags for each of our students and it has a whiteboard, a dictated writing like book. Two notebooks, some markers, some pens, a stylus – [Grade level teacher] submitted at DonorsChoose to get our kids styluses. So we got them all that so that they can do things on their screen because we were seeing some issues with Seesaw. And the kids were just like, "I can't write on the screen, it's too big, it doesn't fit in the box." So, all these things. So we got them styluses and then like dry erase markers and eraser. Some math notebooks. And then at our -- we had a reverse parade and we -- the district gave out Bridges [math curriculum] like supply boxes, material boxes. So we gave out those and then we gave out like a handwriting book, just a few other like workbooks. And like a pen that has like all the different colors just to

> make it fun. So we kind of put that stuff together, the Bridges stuff came from the district, but everything else, we gave out from like a third-grade team perspective. (Interview, November 16, 2020)

Greta described foregoing the inclusion of virtual interfaces in the interest of using hands on materials, citing student capacity for engaging with varied materials. However, as demonstrated in the following observation, there were several drawbacks to this approach.

> Greta working with five students on dictated writing. They all have notebooks at their homes in which they write their sentence, and they then take a picture of their sentence with their Chromebook camera and upload it to Seesaw for teacher review. Students at times struggle to find a writing utensil, to take a photo of their work that's of legible quality, or to upload the photo.
>
> Before reading the sentence, Greta says to her students, "Alright, I'm going to read you the whole thing. I don't want you asking anyone else how to spell the words and I don't want you using text-to-speech." *She later told me that she started to give this reminder after a past event: One student was performing drastically above their previously demonstrated ability in this exercise, and Greta discovered the student was using voice-to-text to transcribe the sentence before copying it verbatim in their notebook. The ingenuity of the student and capacity to leverage available tools seems commendable if counter to immediate instructional goals*.
>
> Greta dictates the following sentence: "'Mom, can I go fishing down at the lake?' he asked excitedly." She repeats the sentence and various parts thereof over the next eight

> minutes. Throughout, she also asks students about their progress and tries to support them through as evidenced in the following:
>
> "[Student 1] how are you doing?"
>
> Greta repeats the sentence.
>
> "[Student 3], how are you doing? [Student 2], if you want me to help you get to Classlink you can share your screen so I can help you. [Student 3]? Yoo hoo, [Student 3]? Did you finish the sentence?"
>
> [Student 3] is not responding.
>
> "[Student 2]? OK [Student 2], you need to go to the internet. [Student 3], put your headphones in you can't hear me. How's your uploading going? […] Today is Thursday, [Student 4]. [Student 1], what word are you on or what's going on?" (Observation, January 28, 2021)

This excerpt highlights several issues typical of Greta's dictated writing groups. Throughout this period, Greta cannot identify where students are in their sentence, notice or correct mistakes, or know at what point in the upload process they are. She therefore cannot identify any challenges that students are encountering and relies on students to advocate for themselves should they encounter errors. At times, students would submit a blank page rather than completing the writing.

Further, Greta's consistent checking in with students regarding which word they are on comprised constant background noise that could be distracting for students who are at other points in their sentence. As students finish, which Greta checked by accessing Seesaw, she tells them that they "can go." "Going" equates to returning to the whole class Zoom room with their peers, though the extent to which these students could access a general education lesson at which

they'd arrived midway through is variable at best. Greta also asks a student to put their headphones in if they can't hear her, a direction rendered obsolete as the student could not hear it, suggesting Greta's lack of awareness of how students experience Zoom.

Greta followed her grade level team's practice and used hands-on materials for this portion of her instruction, though it limited her capacity to provide in-time, relevant feedback to students. Her focus on this activity was to collect data regarding student progress in sentence dictation; however, there were minimal opportunities to provide individualized feedback to students. Further, students spent a portion of instructional time taking photos of their work and uploading it—in once instance, this upload took 15 minutes due to slow internet speeds. Students therefore had to remain in the breakout room with Greta as their photos loaded rather than returning to the general education Zoom room to receive instruction with their peers. While Greta spoke to choosing this route because it was easier for students to navigate, it ultimately swallowed a significant amount of instructional time.

By contrast, Brenda conducted all her instruction using virtual interfaces. She described working with students to learn about how to manage technology and, at times, changing to different instructional platforms to better accommodate students. This involved a significant amount of time teaching students how to engage with platforms. However, in the long run, Brenda seemed able to execute more substantive instruction as she could see student work and provide feedback in real time, rather than waiting for students to upload pictures of their work.

Decisions regarding materials embodied a cost-benefit analysis weighing the amount of time it took to introduce new interfaces and the instructional pay off. An interview with Tess, another special education teacher at Bradbury, encapsulated the differences between the approaches Brenda and Greta used:

> Something I talked to my classroom teachers about is that like there's none of the tools that we have are bad. But you – do have to think like is this so good that I should take five days just teaching how to use the tool before we even get to use it because we have students who need five to eight exposures to something before they can do it. So if you're going to use this cool website you found, fine. But like you have to be so sure that it's the way to deliver this material because I'm going to need you to spend five days showing the class how to use it. (Interview, February 17, 2021)

Brenda and Greta's actions seem to align with this distinction. Brenda spent considerable time working with her students to increase their familiarity with virtual tools at the outset, which ultimately facilitated more consistent and responsive instruction. Though Greta attempted to circumvent technical difficulties by using hands-on materials, several challenges arose with this practice. Enactments of FAPE were more or less limited by materials within existing constraints presented by schedules and caseloads.

Conclusion

Actors across scales differently addressed the provision of FAPE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though state and district actors added more details to the skeletal guidance provided at the federal level, teachers ultimately enacted a limited version of FAPE. Special education teachers, faced with time constraints for connecting with students virtually, prioritized the provision of special education services to students with disabilities at the expense of general education instruction that federal and state level actors assert comprises part of FAPE. Their enactments of FAPE were then further undermined by virtual instruction, challenges that continued even after teachers returned to schools but found themselves dealing with hybrid instruction. Though broadly defined at the federal level, special education teachers facing

logistical constraints, high caseloads, and vague policy messages during the COVID-19 pandemic enacted an incomplete version of FAPE.

These findings hold numerous implications for student learning opportunities. Students with disabilities consistently did not receive the full range of FAPE to which they were entitled. A result of intersecting challenges, special education teachers had to decide which aspect of FAPE students would receive, following a logic of compliance in which the specially designed instruction withing student IEPs as opposed to broader conceptions of FAPE. However, in all but the rarest instances, this does not comprise the entirety of a student's educational program. Students with disabilities thus missed out on access to their full educational program as a result of the pandemic, challenges of virtual instruction, and practitioner decisions.

Logistical challenges further limited special education teachers' capacity to enact FAPE for students. Both teachers referenced changes made to their caseload over the course of the year, with some students receiving services from up to three special education teachers. While these switches complicate the work of teachers, they also hold significant implications for students.

Further, student poverty played a large role in the enactment of FAPE. While the brunt of these conditions is obviously most heavily borne by students and families, the material conditions with which students grappled shaped the work of special education teachers. Material access, internet reliability, and students' learning contexts informs teachers' instructional decisions and their provisions of FAPE.

Though switching schools negatively impacts students' academic outcomes (Sparks, 2016), Brenda and Greta's experiences highlight changes that can occur *within* schools that may particularly impact students with disabilities. This may have a negative impact for students, as they are forced to build new relationships with staff members and potentially adapt to different

instructional approaches. The frequency and extent to which students are reassigned to different case managers is not documented in special education statistics. Further, as this practice happens when new students qualify for special education services or when students with disabilities move in and out of schools, students who attend schools where qualification rates are higher or populations are more mobile may face this issue and its accompanying ramifications to a greater degree. This finding has concerning implications for educational equity as Black and economically disadvantaged students are more likely to be highly mobile (Sparks, 2016), more likely to qualify for special education services (United States Department of Education, 2022; Sullivan & Bal, 2013), and thus more susceptible to having their educational programs impacted by shifting caseload practices.

These shifts to teachers' caseloads and schedules were also important because they contributed to special education teachers' feelings that their work was not fully appreciated and that they were disregarded or accorded lesser status than general education teachers. This finding is consistent with previous research on special education teachers (Hester et al., 2020), who frequently report feeling "overworked and underappreciated" (p.1). Moreover, the imposition from administrators of heavier caseloads and schedule shifts without much say in the matter appeared to contribute to Brenda generally feeling unrecognized within broader school and district discussions of pandemic instruction.

Brenda recounted a particular story that exemplified how her work as a special education teacher was being overlooked by other teachers and administrators. Brenda said that she had been wearing a mask and shield to school to work with an individual student before the broader district return to in-person schooling. The first time she had seen one particular student, the

student had immediately pulled the mask down, revealing Brenda's vulnerability as a special education teacher who was teaching in-person. Brenda explained:

> It's been very, very hard, the fact that everybody's celebrating that the district is 100% virtual, and we're [special education teachers] not. And that there was talk of having a strike about sending the kindergarten teachers in, but we've been in since September, and there's been no solidarity or no concern. (Interview, January 20, 2021)

A lack of recognition or concern for the work of special education teachers, particularly those staff who were teaching in-person when the rest of the district was still remote, undergirded Brenda's discussion of her work and aligned with her perception that special education programming was the "ugly stepchild" of schools. Though this sentiment among special education teachers predates COVID-19 (Samuels, 2018), local responses to the pandemic highlighted divisions between special education programming expectations and exacerbated these feelings.

Finally, the variability of special education teachers' work continued within and was at times heightened by the COVID-19 context. My prior research (2021, p. 3) demonstrated that special education teachers dealt with dynamic working conditions, or "specific elements of a practitioner's work that exhibit paradoxically frequent yet unpredictable fluctuations, requiring consequent attention or reactions from the practitioner." Special education teachers' work comprised reacting to these conditions even in virtual environments, as student attendance and technological difficulties necessitated in-the-moment teacher responses. This illuminates that activities occurring outside of the physical school setting constitute dynamic working conditions and limit special education teachers' capacities to develop effective long-term solutions to these fluctuations in daily practice.

Chapter 4

Variable Enactments of "Paraprofessional" and the Work of Special Education Teachers

> Brenda, a special education teacher at Thompson Elementary School, and Sydney, a paraprofessional, are chatting in a Zoom room, waiting for students to log on for instruction. Their conversation moves to the upcoming return to in-person instruction and two particular students who require support during their arrival to and departure from school. Sydney mentions that her second job is starting, so she will pack her child's daycare bag before she leaves to work at Thompson from 7am to 3pm. Her second job requires her to leave Thompson close to the school day's end, which interferes with her ability to support students during the end of the day dismissal. Sydney and Brenda discuss logistics around dismissal times and the staggered return to in-person instruction for students by grade level. Brenda mentions that Dani, a paraprofessional that typically works with another special education teacher, might be able to support dismissal, though Brenda ultimately takes responsibility for supporting the students' arrivals and departures. (Observation, 3/24/2021)

Special education teachers work closely with paraprofessionals, who occupy a complex role in the realm of special education. Special education teachers are tasked with managing and training paraprofessionals, including assigning paraprofessionals to work with specific students and providing lesson plans or guidance for doing so. Though most research on paraprofessional management and training frames these tasks as consistent elements of special education teachers'

work, paraprofessional capacities and attendance variably shapes the work of special education teachers from day to day (Miesner, 2021; Ghere & York-Barre, 2007).

Paraprofessional-related challenges for special education teachers can largely be attributed to structural issues with the role. Scholarship over the past two decades emphasizes how paraprofessionals remain undertrained (Carter, et al. 2009) and over assigned (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012), or delegated tasks that are outside their position description. Paraprofessionals are expected to deliver direct instruction and other duties typically under the purview of certified teachers (Chambers, 2015). This suggests a type of role intensification undergone by these staff members akin to that witnessed for classroom teachers (Valli & Buese, 2007).

Some researchers emphasize that issues stemming from the overassignment of paraprofessionals can be rectified by role clarification. For example, in their 2010 review of the research literature, Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle (2010) found that in addition to training, retention, and professional respect, a prevailing issue in the work of paraprofessionals is that of unclear delineation of roles. Giangreco (2021) also speaks to a need to reimagine service provision more broadly rather than relying on paraprofessionals. Yet, various studies (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Hehir, 2006) assert that the overassignment of paraprofessionals and ensuing negative impacts to service delivery can be rectified by more clearly articulating that which is or is not in the job description of paraprofessional. Though this argument addresses a crucial issue, it somewhat misses the point—the roles of paraprofessionals *have* been outlined in policy. Repeatedly. Why, then, do paraprofessionals continue to occupy such a fraught position within special education programs and what does this mean for special education teachers and special education policy in practice?

Special education teachers at the nexus of incongruous policies employ professional discretion when training and assigning paraprofessionals, with ensuing ramifications for the practical enactment of IDEA. I argue that despite increasing clarification of the paraprofessional role, vague invocations of training and supervision of paraprofessionals throughout federal, state, and local policy clash against the practical realities of paraprofessional work, contributing to this disconnect between policy and practice. In this chapter, I first contextualize the work of paraprofessionals, examining who these professionals are and how their work is constructed through federal, state, and district polices. I then highlight how special education teachers engage in training and management of paraprofessionals, with ramifications for special education in practice. I conclude by examining how special education teachers make managerial decisions based on perceived paraprofessional capacities and draw on a logic of compliance when overassigning paraprofessionals tasks outside the purview of their role.

Who are Paraprofessionals?

Over the course of my research, I repeatedly reached out to three separate paraprofessionals to talk about their work. Though one replied initially, I was unable to schedule an interview with any paraprofessionals, who, within the context of special education, are those staff members who assist special education teachers in the delivery of special education services. Though a lack of established rapport on my part may have contributed to their omission, the structure of the paraprofessional role may have also hindered their abilities to participate.

Paraprofessionals fall under the category of teaching assistants, both within broader research literature and within data gathered by the United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics. In 2020, 1.3 million people worked as teaching assistants nationwide, with a median income of $28,000 per year (United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2021). In Firglade,

paraprofessionals receive $15.69 an hour, yielding a net income for under $25,000 for paraprofessionals who work every hour of every workday in the regular school year. Further, paid sick leave at Firglade is earned rather than immediately granted, with paraprofessionals accruing one hour of sick leave for every 20 hours worked—roughly equating to one day of leave per month of work. As of December 2021, the local teachers' union was advocating for paid time off for paraprofessionals when schools closed for inclement weather, as paraprofessionals were unpaid for such emergency closures and unprotected against unexpected changes to income.

In Firglade, the fiscal precarity of the paraprofessional role also holds racialized implications, as a greater proportion of paraprofessionals identify as people of color than do teachers. Though most paraprofessionals in the Firglade school district are White, staff of color more frequently occupy paraprofessional roles than they do teacher roles (Table 3). Previous research suggests that race impacts staff relationships, as Black and Latinx paraprofessionals who worked with students classified as having "disruptive behaviors" reported lower overall relationship quality with classroom teachers in comparison to White paraprofessionals (Bronstein, et al. 2021), with ramifications for professional and social contexts within schools. The demographic composition of the workforce coupled with the differential compensation of teachers and paraprofessionals exacerbated racialized income inequities throughout the pandemic, comprising part of the broader context in which special education programming did or did not function.

Table 3
Racial demographics of Firglade teachers and paraprofessionals

		Firglade Teachers	Bradbury Teachers	Thompson Teachers	Firglade Paras	Bradbury Paras	Thompson Paras
Race*							
	Asian	72 (2.67%)	1 (2.08)	1 (2.22)	10 (2.53 %)	0	0
	Black	93 (3.45%)	0	0	96 (24.24%)	1 (14.29)	1 (14.29)
	Hispanic	194 (7.19%)	8 (16.67)	2 (4.44)	28 (7.07 %)	1 (14.29)	1 (14.29)
	American Indian	11 (.41%)	1 (2.08)	0	0	0	0
	Pacific Islander	6 (.22%)	0	0	1 (.25%)	0	0
	Two or more races	25 (.93%)	1(2.08)	4 (8.89)	4 (1.01%)	1 (14.29)	1 (14.29)
	White	2, 298 (85.14%)	37 (77.08)	38 (84.44)	257 (64.9%)	4 (57.14)	4 (57.14)
Total		2699 (100)	48 (100)	45 (100)	396 (100)	6 (100)	6 (100)

Note. Categories reflect language from state department of education

Policy Paradoxes and the Construction of the "Paraprofessional"

Paraprofessionals are invoked in policy documents across federal, state, and local levels. The attention to these crucial staff members across these levels attests to a general understanding that paraprofessionals play a central role in schools, particularly schools receiving Title I funding. As reauthorizations of ESEA have waxed and waned, emphasizing different aspects of paraprofessional work and suggesting different understandings of who paraprofessionals are in a school building, state and local entities have clarified this role. This section summarizes the descriptions of the paraprofessional role across polices as well as differential emphases on training for paraprofessionals across these policy scales.

Federal Policies: Trained, Supervised, and Ambiguously Assigned

The definition of paraprofessional within federal policy has fluctuated in emphases and robustness. The Elementary and Secondary Act (1964) initially maintained that:

> The term "paraprofessional" means an individual who is employed in a preschool, elementary school, or secondary school *under the supervision* of a certified or license teacher, including individuals employed in language instruction educational programs, special education, and migrant education. (§3202[11], emphasis added)

In this definition, the ESEA delineates paraprofessionals from teachers by way of supervision and certification. It also indicates that, in addition to work with students, teachers' work includes supervision of other staff members. The act clarifies who counts as a paraprofessional, indicating that the role, "also known as a 'paraeducator,' includes an education assistant and instructional assistant" (§8101[37]); however, the actual expectations of paraprofessionals have shifted within ESEA over the course of its past two reauthorizations.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), which notoriously advanced market-based reforms in the education system under the Bush administration, included more extensive definitions of paraprofessionals among amendments to Title I of the ESEA. Per Title I guidance issued alongside NCLB (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 1), a paraprofessional is "an employee of an LEA who provides instructional support in a program supported with Title I, Part A funds." NCLB tied the notion of support services to supervision in prior iterations of ESEA, and guidance referencing Section 1119 (g)(2) asserts that "'paraprofessionals who provide instructional support,' *includes* those who provide instructional support services under the direct supervision of a highly qualified teacher (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 1, emphasis added.)" The use of the word "includes" as part of this definition suggests that

paraprofessionals can also include individuals providing other services outside of direct supervision.

A formative aspect of the NCLB Title I amendments is the explicit definition of the role of paraprofessionals. Per federal guidance (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 1): "Because paraprofessionals provide instructional support, they should not be providing planned direct instruction, or introducing to students new skills, concepts, or academic content." NCLB itself then includes a list of responsibilities that paraprofessionals may be assigned in section 1119(g)(2), ranging from tutoring to classroom management to translation. Of interest, however, is the choice of language—paraprofessionals *may* be assigned these roles, suggesting again that they may also take on other duties. As later defined in NCLB (§1119 (g)(3)(a)), however, these duties exempt "any instructional service to a student unless the paraprofessional is working under the direct supervision of a teacher consistent with section 1119."

NCLB also set forth more rigid parameters for paraprofessional certification. NCLB §1119(a)(2)(c)(1) required new paraprofessionals to have one of the following qualifications: "A) completed at least 2 years of study at an institution of higher education; (B) obtained an associate's (or higher) degree; or (C) met a rigorous standard of quality and can demonstrate, through a formal State or local academic assessment." The last option included assessments through which candidates could demonstrate their ability to support literacy and mathematics instruction and is the only parameter that invokes staff understandings of educational practices. Existing paraprofessionals, who until 2001 needed a high school diploma or equivalent, had an additional four years to meet these criteria.

Though NCLB references the need for qualified paraprofessionals, training and professional development are not references within the law as requisite activities for paraprofessionals. This is exemplified by the framing within § 1119 (3)(b)(h):

> A local educational agency receiving funds under this part *may* use such funds to support ongoing training and professional development to assist teachers and paraprofessionals in satisfying the requirements of this section.

The use of “may” as opposed to “must” indicates that LEAs hold agency in determining whether to use these funds to train paraprofessionals. Providing paraprofessionals with professional development is also an option among a list of appropriate uses for local funds, which includes recruitment and retention of staff and professional development opportunities for administrators. However, in keeping with education as a state’s right, the act does not require training as a stipulation for use of federal funds.

Eleven years later, ESEA was again reauthorized under Obama as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This reauthorization did not include the substantive descriptions of paraprofessionals held by NCLB, though it maintained training of paraprofessionals as an option for use of funds. Rather, the emphasis shifted to state professional standards for paraprofessionals. In addition to the qualifications set forth under NCLB, ESSA required states to have professional standard for paraprofessionals. By requiring that states, rather than the federal government, design and uphold these standards, the federal government positioned the definition of paraprofessionals under the domain of education federalism.

Interestingly, despite driving the work of paraprofessionals, the Individuals with Disabilities Act only lightly references this staff role. The sole mention of paraprofessional

duties in IDEA is nestled within broader requirements of state agencies. Section 612, which speaks to state eligibility for IDEA funding, asserts:

> The qualifications under subparagraph (A) include qualifications for related services personnel and paraprofessionals that—[…] allow paraprofessionals and assistants who *are appropriately trained and supervised*, in accordance with State law, regulation, or written policy, in meeting the requirements of this part to be used *to assist in the provision of special education and related services under this part to children with disabilities.* §612(14)(a)(iii)

The passive voice—"are appropriately trained and supervised"—is of particular interest in this piece of policy, indicating flexibility regarding who carries out such training and supervision. However, the fact remains that paraprofessionals require these temporal investments on the behalf of other staff to be qualified for their positions. IDEA was last reauthorized in 2004, under NCLB and its accompanying thorough definitions of paraprofessionals, which may explain the relatively spartan allusions to this role.

IDEA mainly references paraprofessionals in relation to the regulatory duties of the state and consequent eligibility for funding. IDEA highlights that, to receive funding, states must "establish[] and maintain[] qualifications to ensure that personnel necessary to carry out this part are appropriately and adequately prepared and trained, including that those personnel have the content knowledge and skills to serve children with disabilities [§ 612[a][14][a]]." Per this section, the state must define these qualifications and ensure training. However, IDEA [§ 635 [a][8]] requires that states have ''A comprehensive system of personnel development, including the training of paraprofessionals and the training of primary referral sources with respect to the basic components of early intervention services available in the State."

Some ambiguity across federal definitions of paraprofessionals may relate to the broad use of the term. While the paraprofessionals of focus in this study work with students with disabilities, paraprofessionals in other roles may support instruction for students without IEPs, for English Language Learners, or as translators for families. Federal policy documents do not outline roles specific to paraprofessionals who work exclusively with students with disabilities, so there may be aspects of the role constructed in policy that are not appropriate or applicable to all special education teachers.

Under federal policy, paraprofessionals are school staff who work under the supervision of teachers in an assistive capacity. Though more thoroughly defined in NCLB, a pared down definition of paraprofessionals operates in ESSA. Coupled with IDEA, these policies emphasize a need for training, albeit within minimal discussion of what this training entails, and qualifications. These policies thus pass the responsibility of more clearly articulating the role of paraprofessionals and creating mechanisms for ensuring the training of paraprofessionals to states.

State and District Policies: Increased Specificity

As iterated throughout federal policy, it is the states' duty to establish and maintain qualifications for paraprofessionals as well as ensure that these staff members are appropriately trained. The State Department of Education in the present study importantly clarifies the role of paraprofessionals. In a 2015 effort to make this clarification, the state superintendent of schools wrote:

> Teachers plan and deliver instruction, diagnose learning needs, prescribe content delivery through classroom activities, assess student learning, report outcomes to administrators and parents, and evaluate the effects of instruction. The primary job of the

> paraprofessional is to support the instruction provided by the teacher, provide assistance to the teacher, assist with classroom management, and other duties as assigned.

This brief continues with a lengthy table, juxtaposing the duties of teachers with those of paraprofessionals. An excerpt from that table (Table 4) highlights (a) the role of a paraprofessional as support personnel who reinforce content that has been taught, rather than an independent provider of direct instruction, and (b) references teacher supervision. The state further explicates in detail those tasks within and outside of the roles of paraprofessionals. However, they may have a different approach to defining the role of paraprofessional in comparison to other states.

Table 4
Staff duties adapted from state department of education

Teacher Duties	Paraprofessional Duties
Provide instruction to and evaluate students	Support the work of the teacher
Set the environment of the classroom	Follow the teacher's guidance and direction
Teach new academic content (or language education instruction to English learners)	Reinforce content taught by teacher (e.g., read the academic material to the student(s), listen to student(s) read, oversee/facilitate completion of assignment, (ELL) provide language access and support comprehension of academic material, etc.)
Provide intensive, direct services to students with IEPs	Support and reinforce practices provided by the teacher, under the supervision of the teacher

Though the district's framing of paraprofessional work is situated within this state definition, it initially revolves around assisting students rather than teachers. As per the job description.

> Special Education Assistants provide assistance to students with a variety of disabilities. Duties may be performed in the classroom and/or the community. Duties may include, but are not limited to: wheelchair maneuvering, positioning, bathrooming, diapering,

> and/or lifting, maintenance of records, and assisting with the instructional program using instructional materials that are adapted to meet the students' needs.

The description later invokes expectations for teacher supervision for paraprofessionals in the "essential duties" section. These duties include providing "instructional reinforcement to students in the classroom and at community-based sites under the direction of a teacher" and "assist[ing] students individually and in small groups with academic and recreational programming under a teacher's direction." This framing aligns with that put forth by the state, though it does not provide an extensive list of those duties outside the realm of paraprofessionals as alluded to at the state level and explicitly stated in prior federal policy. The job description for paraprofessionals at the district level is the one most easily accessible and referenced by paraprofessionals and special education teachers. Consequently, as we seek to understand the application of paraprofessionals in practice, we must appreciate the impact of district defined parameters.

Though the district addresses paraprofessional trainings, it follows the lead of policy from broader scales by baking a significant amount of discretion into its delivery. As per the district's special education improvement plan:

> To augment a robust professional learning system for [paraprofessionals], it is recommended that the district create more job embedded learning opportunities. Beginning with the 2014-15 school year, each [paraprofessional] was provided 25 hours per year (of paid employment) to support professional learning activities. This may be used to attend after school professional learning activities or collaborate with teaching staff. With assistance from the Assistant Director, the Principal of each school will devise a plan that meets their school needs. Moreover, [paraprofessionals] are expected to

participate in all district-wide professional learning days that take place during the school year.

The district then passes the management of training on to schools, with principals charged with determining if and how to train their paraprofessionals. However, as noted in the opening vignette and later alluded to in a following section, the scheduling of these extra 25 hours per year of paid professional development may not be possible due to paraprofessional schedules and may not be on the radar of those special education teachers who ultimately need that time with their coworkers.

Paraprofessional Management as a Component of Special Education Teachers' Work

Despite invocations of training across policy scales as a precursor to paraprofessional work, special education teachers in this study regularly trained paraprofessionals in response to daily fluctuations and identified needs. Special education teachers engage in this aspect of their work by determining the skills of different paraprofessionals and assigning them to students who they seemed capable of assisting or training them accordingly. Though this appraisal ideally takes place at the outset of the year, special education teachers in this study engaged in ad hoc training and spontaneous reassignment to students in light of paraprofessional capacities. The bulk of paraprofessional management undertaken by special education teachers related to managing instructional schedules and personnel in response to paraprofessional absences. Decisions regarding assignment, training, and rescheduling held implications for the educational experiences of students with disabilities.

Assigning Paraprofessionals

Though policy repeatedly stresses the roles of paraprofessionals as providing assistance and support through special education teachers, special education teachers depended on

paraprofessionals to provide specially designed and modified academic and social emotional instruction to students with disabilities. In practice, paraprofessionals worked with groups of students instead of—rather than under the direct supervision of—special education teachers. Both Brenda and Greta described deploying two paraprofessionals to work in bilingual classrooms, as neither special education teacher was fluent in Spanish. Paraprofessionals led reading instruction, social-emotional check-ins, and supported work completion for students. As Greta described:

> Once we changed the schedule to be what it is now, I had a lot of conflicts. So I have another paraprofessional that's actually bilingual, so she has been able -- because my two first graders are in DLI. So my paraprofessional sees those two. She does both their reading groups and then she does their math group as well, and so I just plan all the stuff for her. I make all of my lessons for both that paraprofessional and my other paraprofessional in Google Slides. And then I share it with them and then they just go through the slide deck with the students that they work with. (Interview, November 16, 2020)

Greta describes how the school schedule interfered with her ability to work with students, a factor further unpacked in the preceding chapter, but Greta also perceived that this paraprofessional was better equipped to work with Spanish-speaking students due to the paraprofessional's linguistic proficiency. Though Greta described planning instruction for those students, the paraprofessional functioned as the primary provider of special education services for these students. Brenda echoed Greta's experience with paraprofessionals, noting that she planned instruction that paraprofessionals delivered and that she assigned a bilingual paraprofessional to work with students in the dual language program.

In contrast to other work which finds that teachers place paraprofessionals with students with high needs (Suter & Giangreco, 2009), both teachers made placements because paraprofessionals held a skill set that they lacked. However, while proficiency in a student's native language can support an affirmative environment for learning (Gay, 2018), it does not equate to pedagogical expertise. As this instruction was unsupervised and constituted the students' specially designed instruction, it fell outside of the realm of the paraprofessional role. The frequency with which paraprofessionals are placed with students who are non-native English speakers warrants further exploration and raises concerns regarding student access to academic instruction should these isolated incidences reflect broader trends.

Special education teachers did not consider paraprofessional skills in every instance, however. In some cases, they prioritized the sheer presence of an adult, or "body" as Brenda called it. Brenda demonstrated this stance when explaining how paraprofessional support changed upon the shift to in-person schooling. As she explained in our final interview:

> And I had one [paraprofessional] until about a week and a half ago, well, a week ago. And I was just like, 'There's no way I can do this all with what I have. I need somebody else.' And they got me an emergency [paraprofessional]. […] It's not tied to [students' IEP] minutes at all. It's just—I'm getting everything covered, having a body in every space when I need a body in a space. (Interview, May 25, 2021)

In this excerpt, Brenda references that the paraprofessional appointment is not tied to student service minutes, indicating that the paraprofessional is not charged with providing instruction. Yet, she references complying with aspects of IEPs in which students need adult support or coverage, which comprise an aspect of student service minutes. She may also be suggesting a need for student behavioral support as yet unrequired in the students' IEPs. In either case, her

framing of this support as “a body in a space” suggests that she does not consider the professional skills of paraprofessionals as relevant to their placement with students in these instances.

On the whole, the skills that paraprofessionals bring to their position informed the decisions and work of special education teachers. Though there were exceptions to this trend, special education teachers determined assignments based on how adult capacities aligned with child needs. The variability in paraprofessional experience and preparation, described in the following section, thus informed special education teacher street-level decisions and also held implications for the quality of education received by students.

Training and Supporting Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals arrive with different background skills, requiring different levels of training to meet the obligations of their role and, at times, obligations beyond their role. However, the extent to which special education teachers train paraprofessionals is variable. Paraprofessionals may arrive throughout the school year and may not have temporal flexibility to attend training after the school day. Training opportunities are further limited by special education teachers’ busy schedules. As a result, the instruction that special education teachers envision and need to satisfy students’ educational needs and that delivered by paraprofessionals may differ.

Brenda and Greta expressed appreciation for their paraprofessionals, emphasizing that their ability to complete their work hinged on paraprofessionals' presence and flexibility. Yet they also noted complications that emerged within these professional relationships. Both special education teachers spoke to differences between their expectations for paraprofessionals and the actions of paraprofessionals. As Greta described in her May interview:

> It's been harder to try to, I guess, just make sure that paraprofessionals are doing what I want them to do because things that I thought were happening all this virtual time, like check in and everything, once I saw it happening in-person I was like, 'That's not what I told you.' So it's been just being creative, like making a very strict schedule of 'do this, do this, do this,' and then having them write notes on it about how things are going. (Interview, May 24, 2021)

In this statement, Greta speaks to the disconnect between the instruction that she intended for paraprofessionals to deliver and how instruction unfolded in practice. She also notes that paraprofessionals did not do what she "told" them to do, identifying her directions as sufficient preparation for paraprofessionals who otherwise do not hold experience as special education teachers. In response, Greta provided an explicit script rather than training the paraprofessional more broadly regarding pedagogical approaches and student needs. The former required a smaller time investment than the latter.

Greta also suggests in this excerpt that her attempts to monitor the activities of paraprofessionals comprise another aspect of her work. At a minimum, Greta must check in with paraprofessionals for some level of quality control over instruction. Yet, she also describes creating schedule that provide more explicit guidance for this staff member to ensure they adhere to existing instructional plans. Presumably, Greta also reviews the notes that the paraprofessional writes about instruction as part of this supervision.

Brenda also referenced disparities between the instruction that she intended paraprofessionals to provide and the instruction that actually took place. Rather than framing this disconnect as a failure on the part of paraprofessionals to follow instructions, she attributes these instances to a lack of training for paraprofessionals.

> We use paraprofessionals as teachers sometimes. And here we have the kids that need the most highly trained people in the building, because they didn't succeed in regular ed. And we're putting people that have very little training about education to provide their reading instruction, or their writing instruction, or their math instruction. And I won't do that. Because I don't think it's right for kids. But I find ways that they can support what we're trying to do. But I have to do a lot of training for the paraprofessionals too. Because, you know, like in a hierarchy of support, very kind women who've been doing paraprofessional work for a long time give kids the answers. They're more concerned with completing the task correctly than building learning skills so the kids know how to finish the task correctly. And so I have to do a lot around that. Because it just makes me cringe. (Interview, October 7, 2020)

Brenda problematizes their role, perceiving paraprofessionals as lacking adequate professional experience to support students and therefore requiring additional training to work with students. She references that some paraprofessionals enter the position with minimal training and alludes to a lack of codified venues for paraprofessionals to receive that support outside of special education teachers. In this instance, Brenda describes taking on this training herself to ensure that paraprofessionals do not complete assignments for students. Observations later in the year contradicted her assertion that she doesn't place paraprofessionals with students to provide direct instruction, suggesting that changes in her caseload (described in the previous chapter) may have required her to compromise this stance.

Brenda also referenced holding a different orientation toward working with students than that demonstrated by some of the paraprofessionals with whom she worked. In one interview, she noted that a paraprofessional saw student completion of work as reflecting on her capacity as

a staff member rather than the academic development of the student. The paraprofessional completed some work for the student as a result. Brenda described addressing a similar situation with another paraprofessional in the following:

> I have two kids that really -- they have learning needs. They don't have a lot of academic needs. And so they work with one of my assistants a lot. And she's a wonderful assistant. She would probably be the best assistant in the building. But what's being turned in from working with her and what the IEP says they're capable of is very different. And she'll communicate with me. We didn't get that done. Well, wait, it's not *we*. Did he get it done and did *he* get it done? Because "we" get it done infers it was totally scaffolded and supported. (Interview, October 7, 2020)

In addition to ensuring that paraprofessionals engage in intended instruction, Brenda suggests that some levels of training is necessary to foster a shared understanding of instructional goals. In the above instance, Brenda articulates her perception that the paraprofessional provides too much support for a student who could complete work and demonstrate understanding of their own accord.

Switches to paraprofessional assignments further complicated matters. As described in the chapter three special education teachers experienced changes to which students were on their caseloads. Paraprofessional schedules also shifted to meet the needs of new configurations of students. In other instances, paraprofessionals were reassigned to work primarily with new special education teachers.

For example, a Bradbury SET named Tess remained virtual after the return to in-person schooling. One of Tess's students struggled in her absence and the student's one-to-one paraprofessional, Dee, was unable to address their needs. Dee was reassigned to Greta's

caseload, and Flora, a paraprofessional from Greta's caseload, was assigned to work with the student as the team felt that Flora was better equipped to work with the student. This change of personnel meant that both Dee and Flora were tasked with building relationships with and providing instruction to students with four weeks remaining in the school year. Greta explained:

> I had really consistent support this entire year until we came back in person. And there's a different student, and that special ed teacher [Tess] is not back in person. So that student has been struggling. So the paraprofessional [Dee] that got hired to be with that student cannot work with that student. So then [Dee] got switched with [the student] I have. I had to do a lot of rearranging with groups so that the paraprofessional [Flora] that has been working with these kids the whole year could continue their instruction, but we're like cramming it all in the morning now trying to get as much in as we can. Because it's also like I did like a quick training for the paraprofessional [Flora] that I've been working with all year on a certain intervention program. And then just to have somebody new [Dee] come in four weeks before the end of the school year, and like, *I'm not going to spend time teaching you how to do this new intervention.* (Interview, May 24, 2021, emphasis added)

Greta noted that the change of paraprofessional forced her to reconfigure her schedule. However, she also noted that though she invested time to train Flora in an intervention for students, she declined to do so for Dee. Greta undertook an informal cost-benefit analysis, deeming that the time investment required to train Dee outweighed inconvenience of changing student schedules so that Flora could continue working with them, albeit to the extent possible. Fluctuations to paraprofessional assignments thus resulted in students receiving the intervention at a new time, despite potential conflicts with other instructional subjects as the original schedule was created

with this content in mind. Further, as Greta alluded to a constraint on timing as a result of the scheduling shift, this switch may limit the extent to which students received these instructional interventions.

In spring interviews, I asked both Brenda and Greta about suggestions they had to improve the provision of special education services. Both brought up paraprofessionals of their own accord, but with different foci. Brenda noted the need for investment in teachers over paraprofessionals, stating, “I think more certified teachers versus paraprofessionals. That’s a big solution. We just take less expensive support staffing.” Here, Brenda notes how district and school practices and financial allocations determine which staff members will serve students with disabilities. By contrast, Greta described a need for greater investment in paraprofessionals:

> I think it would be really beneficial for paraprofessionals to have some kind of training before they get hired as paraprofessionals. Like right now, I mean, I think something has changed, but in the past it’s been like anyone that needs a job could be [a paraprofessional]. Like they’ve never been around kids at all. And then they come and they’re like, ‘Well, I hope you don’t expect me to help in the bathroom. I hope you don’t expect me to be hands on with the kid.’ I’m like, “I don’t know what you expected here buddy.’ […] So I just think there’s a lot of turnover with paraprofessionals because of the expectation and the fact that they don’t get paid that much, which is ridiculous. […] So I think that in order to get quality instruction for kids, you need to have smaller caseloads and you need to have paraprofessionals that are paid more and that have training, that want to be there. Because there are really great paraprofessionals , but then there’s also really not great paraprofessionals. (Interview, May 24, 2021)

Greta sees this as a personnel issue, with a need to get the right people in the position and then provide them with adequate supports and compensation. However, Brenda sees the paraprofessional position as inherently flawed in other ways and hints at the paraprofessional position as a shortcut to ostensibly meet the supports called for in IEPs and by IDEA in as cost-efficient a manner as possible. Though both practitioners identify issues with the position, their different suggested solutions indicate different orientations—albeit potentially mutually inclusive orientations—to the work of special education and how it can be improved.

Responding to Paraprofessional Absences through Instructional Shifts

Though impactful, training and paraprofessional skills are only relevant insofar as these staff members are present to do their jobs. Paraprofessional absences, which impact in-person instruction (Miesner, 2021), also impacted virtual instruction. Brenda and Greta both spoke to regular paraprofessional absences during virtual instruction, albeit with less frequency than they generally encountered with in-person instruction. These absences, which connected to systemic issues regarding the paraprofessional position, resulted in ad hoc adjustments and reassignments on the part of special education teachers and compromised instruction for students with disabilities.

When paraprofessionals were absent, special education teachers had to reconfigure their schedules. During separate observations, Greta received word that a paraprofessional would not be present to work with one of the third graders on her caseload in the afternoon. In a brief interlude between instructional groups, Greta informed me in the first instance that she would combine her instructional group with the group led by her paraprofessional to ensure student support during this time. Though Greta emailed her special education resource teacher (RTSE, see Chapter 5) that she needed a sub during this period, she was unable to "email around" to find

coverage as recommended by the special education resource teacher since she was teaching other students. Greta combined these instructional groups, creating a larger group with students who had were working on different assignments and at different reading levels. Despite their attendance in the Zoom meeting, the students that typically worked with the paraprofessional were limited in their capacity to participate in a lesson designed for students with different academic goals.

Greta's actions align with those demonstrated by teachers in other studies, who prioritize student instructional time over individualized instruction in response to paraprofessional turnover (Ghere & York-Barre, 2007). A key difference for Greta, however, is the virtual environment, attesting to the permeation of these dynamics beyond physical spaces. Greta's makeshift system prioritized time with students and adult supervision regardless of the quality of instruction, suggesting her adherence to a logic of compliance that privileged meeting minutes over the provision of substantive content. By taking on coverage herself in a virtual environment, Greta's may have more closely adhered to IDEA than leaving some students without a teacher and fully instructing others. Neither option provided all students with the instruction they needed.

Brenda encountered similar disruptions on account of paraprofessional absences. One morning, Brenda was working with a student during a check-in period and ensured them that they would receive some individualized adult attention throughout the day. However, upon the culmination of this period, Brenda received notice that a paraprofessional had not yet been in and therefore Brenda would have to reallocate the previously promised individual time for one student to other students who were not receiving coverage. In another instance, communication regarding absences in the virtual format complicated coverage. Brenda typically did not see one

of her paraprofessionals during the day, as this paraprofessional supported bilingual students in the third grade DLI class. However, on February 12th, Brenda told me that the paraprofessional had been absent the day prior without Brenda's knowledge. The paraprofessional did not reach out, nor did the grade level teachers or families reach out, and the students in that class went without support for the day. Such absences in an in-person environment would typically be communicated by office staff; however, the absence of these channels in virtual environments ultimately resulted in students missing instructional supports.

An issue underlying paraprofessional absences was the lack of substitutes available in the district. When absences happened, the onus to find a substitute or coverage was generally placed on special education teachers. At a special education team meeting in Bradbury, the principal, social worker, and special education teachers discussed strategies to address paraprofessional absences:

> Nigel (Principal) brings up a paraprofessional absence that Greta dealt with yesterday in which the paraprofessional told Greta that she would not be able to cover afternoon classes with short notice. He notes that there are no subs anywhere so 'we need to have open communication with paraprofessionals that support you to get advanced notice if they are going to be out.' Have a 'just in case' plan for students and covering staff. Greta suggests that paraprofessionals email the whole special education team rather than just the special education teacher with whom they work to fill their own absence, as special education teachers are usually delivering instruction and can't coordinate coverage. Tess (another special education teacher) has dealt with 4 instances of a particular paraprofessional notifying her of absence 5 minutes before their group instruction is scheduled. She sent the paraprofessional the numbers of the students' families to let them

> know that there won't be anyone on the Zoom call for their students, as Tess is in instruction with other groups at that time. Principal notes that this is a perennial tension, with paraprofessionals more likely to be absent than other staff members.
>
> Aubrey (social worker) notes that there are some staff members who have more open schedules. She suggests a two-layer back up plans, in which paraprofessionals first reach out to a designated paraprofessional with a relatively open schedule first to find coverage and then contact the broader group. The principal notes that the team may want to create a generic template for paraprofessionals with each other's phone numbers. He describes the special education team's work as interdependent and suggests that staff 'reputations can help support our work,' indicating that having to recruit the coverage of another paraprofessional might provide some positive peer pressure to be out less. The special education team seems to believe that there are some last-minute absences that are less legitimate than others. Greta offers to create the document, describing that it feels stressful when she's using her phone as a projector for a lesson and gets texts about paraprofessional absences and can't respond. (Observation, November 18, 2020)

This conversation reflects problem solving to first ensure that instruction happens if possible. However, as Tess mentions asking the paraprofessional to notify families that they will not be there, an aspect of this conversation also revolves around assigning blame for failure to deliver instruction to students with disabilities. Rather than Tess notifying parents and facing potential conflict, the paraprofessional must communicate about service provision for the student on Tess's caseload. Herein, participants individualize issues of paraprofessional attendance and

retention, rather than focusing on systemic or institutional processes that disempower paraprofessionals or limit their attendance, especially during a pandemic.

Conclusion

Despite increasing clarification of the paraprofessional role, vague invocations of training and supervision of paraprofessionals throughout federal, state, and local policy clash against the practical realities of paraprofessional work, creating a disconnect between policy and practice. Special education teachers at the nexus of this disconnect prioritized compliance with FAPE over compliance when training and assigning paraprofessionals. This held ramifications for the educational experience of students with disabilities, as well as for paraprofessionals whose training was at times deprioritized. The ensuing dynamics between paraprofessionals and special education teachers comprised a factor with which special education teachers grapple when approaching instruction and adhering to IDEA.

Policy across scales emphasizes the need for trained, qualified paraprofessionals and delineates the tasks that are affiliated with this role. Though Walker and Smith's (2015) review found positive impacts of workshop, lecture, or classroom-based paraprofessional training on student outcomes, paraprofessionals did not typically arrive to the role with prior training, nor did they have access to extensive training in the context of this study. Though special education teachers expressed those paraprofessionals lacked training to perform the tasks that policy requires of them, they continued to assign paraprofessionals to support these tasks and, in some cases, tasks beyond those required of their role.

This use of paraprofessionals can be construed as an instructional choice on the part of special education teachers, as the scheduling and delegation of roles to paraprofessionals is mostly under the purview of special education teachers. Yet "choice" does not seem an apt term

to describe this process. Special education teachers have a federal obligation to provide students with services, yet as outlined in the preceding chapter schools remain limited by various factors in doing so. The primary "tools" at special education teachers' disposal to attempt to meet student needs were paraprofessionals. This aligns with Giangreco's (2021) work, which likens paraprofessional use to "Maslow's hammer," or the "human tendency to be over reliant on a familiar tool to the exclusion of other potentially more appropriate tools" (p. 281). Absent from this framing is consideration of the COVID context, in which access to other "tools"—physical settings, a broader array of staff members—became even more limited than in regular schooling times.

In part resulting from a lack of training and overassignment for paraprofessionals, Brenda and Greta's accounts of paraprofessional instruction indicate that assigning instruction to paraprofessionals doesn't consistently equate with adequate provision of specially designed instruction. Though these special education teachers assigned paraprofessionals to work with students to ostensibly meet the service minutes of their broad caseloads, they at times found paraprofessionals' work inconsistent with their conceptions of quality instruction for those students. By assigning paraprofessionals to work with these students, the instructional minutes in student IEPs were occupied, if not substantively. In this way, both Brenda and Greta displayed a logic of compliance that foregrounded meeting the instructional requirements of FAPE in terms of time supported by an adult over substantive instruction, a persistent theme throughout their work. Additionally, as paraprofessional proficiency and school structures (Biggs, Gilson, & Carter 2016) impact the quality of relationships between paraprofessionals and special education teachers, training and perceived competencies may create a ripple effect that impacts social dynamics within schools.

Further, the context of special education limits the ability of special education paraprofessionals to engage in their duties in a way that aligns with policy. For example, the notion that paraprofessionals are under constant supervision is not realistic regardless of the practice area. General education teachers and special education teachers often dispatch paraprofessionals to work with students as they are occupied with other students and cannot do so. This introduces a paradox in which the work of paraprofessionals is to support the work of teachers, but supervision adds to the work of teachers. We can, of course, argue that this is not what the policy means, that the vague language suggests supervision in the form of teacher check-ins and morning planning meetings. Above examples detail how these forms of supervision may be insufficient to maintain instructional quality. However, this is exactly the issue--though these definitions must remain somewhat vague so that schools can adapt these roles to local control, this lack of detail can result in enactments so varied as to render the policy guidance irrelevant.

Chapter 5

Enacting Administration and Shaping Special Education:

The Role of Resource Teachers for Special Education

> So being at Marshall and Bradbury, I have two administrators that I'm working with. I actually have two assistant directors [ADs] because Marshall is a middle school and, you know, the other is elementary. So, there's two different ADs. And it's an entire staff. It's an entire load of students. And Bradbury, I think it was this year, we've had a little more movement. So, I'd have to double check my numbers, but we were somewhere around 56 students with disabilities. And that's really not including all of the speech kids that are just speech alone. And so, you have to kind of have a general knowledge of each and every one of them. So, I have that for two buildings. It's insane.
> [Leann, Interview, December 3, 2020]

The work of special education teachers is impacted by a need for policy compliance. Much of this compliance is documented through paperwork—IEPs, reevaluations, and in the time of COVID-19, compensatory services. This chapter emphasizes how a locally created special education resource teacher (RTSE) position, a policy in and of itself structured to promote compliance with IDEA, differentially shaped special education teacher engagement compliance documentation for compensatory education services at two different schools. I emphasize how this district level policy was variably performed by individuals in the role,

differentially engaged with by administrators, and informed the workload of special education teachers.

I ground this work in research regarding the roles and effects of instructional coaches in schools, as RTSEs in this study functioned as instructional coaches for special education teachers. As per Galey's (2016) synthesis of relevant policy literature, instructional coaches are often positioned to support the implementation of education policy by "developing teacher practice, […] building instructional capacity, and […] helping local leaders implement instructional policy" (p. 55). In some instances, instructional coaches buffer teachers from the impacts of policy (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012) and in others they foster sensemaking around instruction (Domina, et al. 2015). Though extensive research discusses how instructional coaches shape the work of general education teachers, minimal work investigates how professionals in this role shape the work of special education teachers. Existing research notes that general education teachers and special education teachers accrue similar benefits from instructional coaching (Reddy, Lekwa, & Shernoff, 2020) In this chapter, I argue that RTSEs' subjective enactments of their roles shape the tasks that special education teachers take on and administrative involvement in the work of special education teachers. The enactments of the RTSE role buffered teachers in Thompson from paperwork, while maintaining the workloads of teachers at Bradbury. Thus, this chapter exemplifies how and why instructional coaches help or hinder special education teachers.

I situate this work within extant work on administrative mediation of policy and consequent classroom impacts. Administrators mediate the impact of policy on instructional practices (Diamond, 2012), and districts and schools "craft[] coherence" (Honig & Hatch, 2004) by bridging and buffering against broader policy goals. In other instances, school leaders adhere

to the priorities of central office staff (Wong, Coburn, & Kamel, 2020). School administrators play a large role in determining institutional rules, goals, and expectations, which influence special education teachers' instructional decisions (Ruppar, Gaffney, & Dymond, 2015) and the content they include in IEPs (Ruppar and Gaffney, 2011; Bray & Russell, 2018). They also shape the extent to which teachers more broadly comply with policy (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). Further, relational trust among administrators, staff, students, and families plays an important role in supporting school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

At Bradbury and Thompson, RTSEs differently enacted the role, with impacts on institutional routines and practices related to special education programming. As Bradbury's RTSE Leann took a district-driven and compliance-oriented approach to her work, special education teachers at Bradbury generally experienced the full brunt of special education paperwork expectations amid the complexities wrought by the pandemic. Whereas Leann understood her role as one with limited power, Thompson's RTSE, Cassie, took a relational stance and saw herself as actively shaping the special education programming taking place at Thompson. Cassie emphasized her membership in the school community and buffered special education teachers from certain tasks. These approaches were facilitated by the differential structures of the RTSE role at each school.

The orientations of principals at Bradbury and Thompson to the RTSE position further shaped principal involvement in special education programming. Bradbury's principal, Nigel, held a skeptical stance toward the RTSE position, which increased his involvement in special education programming decisions despite an orientation towards teacher autonomy. Conversely, Thompson's principal, Evan, positioned Cassie as a trusted, full-time staff member which

minimized his involvement in special education programming decisions despite a comparatively compliance-focused orientation.

In what follows, I first outline how and why the role of RTSE was differently enacted at Bradbury and Thompson. I then examine how these different enactments shaped administrative participation and the working contexts of special education teachers. I conclude that the format of the RTSE role impacts how these professionals undertake their responsibilities within schools, with ensuing ramifications for special education teachers and students with disabilities.

Guidance and Compliance: The Work of RTSEs

Unique to the Firglade School District (FSD), the RTSE position was outlined as an instructional coach for special education teachers and a monitor of compliance for special education programming. The job description for this position is as follows:

> The primary role of the [RTSE] is to provide technical assistance, guidance, and support to teachers, administrators, and support staff who educate students with disabilities, ensuring that all children with disabilities are provided a free appropriate education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living. [Job description from district careers website]

This description positions RTSEs in both a coaching and consultant role, noting that the RTSE supports teachers as well as administrators. Further, RTSEs are to ensure that students receive a free appropriate education, indicating a link between the work of the RTSE and compliance with federal policy. The role description, however, is notably vague—that which comprises "technical assistance, guidance, and support" remaining undefined and therefore open to subjective interpretation.

The nature of the RTSE role at Firglade changed over the past decade. The district administrator described the evolution of the RTSE role during his tenure in the district:

> So, when I first came into the office, all [RTSE]s were in this office. Like they didn't — no one had an office at the school. I had my cadre of schools that I supported, but really for like completing initial evaluations and on an annual basis, maybe do like 50 or something initially evaluations. You know and obviously like being in the school, there was a small component of new staff orientation and mentoring, kind of like mentoring. And then, of course, if somebody sees you like, 'Hey, what's that one thing? Where's that one form?' Or 'How do you do this?' Or 'Hey, can you come and look at this?' And it was much more organic in terms of like the supports for staff. (Interview, March 17, 2021)

The district administrator described the RTSE role as providing on-call support for evaluations and ad hoc support once in the building. However, there weren't formalized systems for RTSEs to support teachers throughout the school year. He continued to explain how and why he shifted the nature of the role:

> That switched then as I became the executive director, and that switched to be more of a site-based —our time actually being able to pull out staff to have special ed only professional development where you had authorized subs and then go to…some big venue to have a PD. Actually, the research is pretty clear that those are not super effective…in terms of adult learning. And then the second thing is you're putting a student with a sub for the day and it's expensive. So, all those factors where we thought about, 'What if we just had a [RTSE] support a school or two?' […]So, the idea would be that they would complete the initial evaluations. They'd be much more part of the SSIT

> [Student Support Intervention Team] process. They would be an onsite kind of in-the-moment, kind of professional development, and have a good relationship with staff, so that we can just have like staff meetings and like, 'Here's the latest, here's the guidance on that.' (Interview, March 17, 2021)

The district administrator depicted the newly conceptualized RTSE role as a coach of special education teachers who is embedded within particular schools, as opposed to an on-call practitioner housed in central office. He also noted a compliance-focus within the role, with RTSEs providing guidance on various special education-related responsibilities. Further, he justified this practice by referencing research that larger PD sessions for special education teachers were both ineffective for teacher learning and inefficient from a cost perspective. Rather than deploying RTSEs to schools on a need-by-need basis, Firglade featured one full time RTSE at each high school. Other schools received part time allocations for RTSEs, resulting in most RTSEs at the middle and elementary school level splitting their time between two schools.

Same Role, Different Formats

The RTSE position, like other instructional coach positions (Hannan & Russell, 2020), was differently enacted across contexts. Leann at Bradbury split her time between Bradbury and a middle school, operating as the RTSE for both schools, whereas Cassie split her time at Thompson between the role of RTSE and coach of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (a district-wide behavior response program), operating in two positions at one school. These differential formats contributed to how these two staff members approached their work as RTSEs.

Leann was in her third (and, ultimately, final) year as RTSE at Bradbury. Leann's time as RTSE was split between Bradbury and Marshall, an affluent middle school on the other side

of the city. In the excerpt that opens this chapter, she spoke to the breadth of her work, which spanned communication with assistant directors of special education who functioned as supervisors for the district central office, school principals, staff members, and acquaintance with the needs of students with disabilities at both of her assigned schools. She alluded to feeling that the breadth of her responsibilities was unwieldy, describing her workload as "insane."

Leann expressed how her appointment at two schools, typical of most RTSEs in Firglade, complicated the management of relationships and responsibilities integral to her work. She spoke to the challenges of being a RTSE at two sites:

> It's tough. I often feel like, I miss out on certain things because there's been some really, more so at Bradbury, but just really high needs kids and really big events that happen. And then I'm not there. And sometimes, I won't even hear about the situation. And somebody, they'll say, 'Oh, well, what's happening with this?' And I don't know. And it's like you kind of feel like just an idiot, frankly, because I don't know. And then I have to go and track down that information, which then adds— takes away time and whatever. So, that's tough. (Interview, December 3, 2020)

In this excerpt, Leann notes a tension within the RTSE role. On one hand, she is required to support staff at two schools. However, in being split between two sites, she misses out on events at the schools she is employed to support. Seeking out knowledge of events that occurred in her absence then becomes an added responsibility of her work.

Interestingly, Aubrey, the school social worker, had a different take on this aspect of Leann's work. Aubrey worked closely with members of the special education team to support students and families and held insights into the RTSE role as she had previously filled it. In describing her professional relationship with Leann, Aubrey said:

> We all kind of are in the same office, so she has someone when she is only there three days a week to be, like, 'Oh, what happened when I was gone? Who was struggling with what?' She also, I think, people drop in very often to talk to [school psychologist] and I and kind of problem solve, and then she can be there and be included in that. So that helps her have the information that she needs. Otherwise, you know, it's okay. I think we — definitely, there are many texts at night, like, 'What do you think about this. How does this sound to you? Can we problem solve this situation?' On behalf of both of us. (Interview, February 19, 2021)

Aubrey spoke to providing Leann with background information that she missed while at Marshall. Aubrey may have an overtly rosy assessment of how she supports Leann, or perhaps Aubrey's support at this level remains insufficient for Leann to stay up to date with Bradbury's events. Conversely, Leann may have overemphasized this aspect of her work to highlight the complexities with which she grapples as RTSE.

Leann also noted that the school environments in which she worked were "completely different," adding a further element to navigate as she moved between spaces. She explained:

> So, there's just never enough resources for the amount of kids and the behaviors and the trauma that comes into Bradbury. It can be very, very trying. And we don't really see that much in Marshall. Marshall has always been fully staffed, besides this year. This year, there was a hiring freeze and whatever. But normally, they're completely staffed. Staff shows up all the time. [Paraprofessionals] – [Marshall] had seven of them last year. And I think, see Bradbury — gosh. They had quite a few, too. But Bradbury's issue, though, is it was like a revolving door because [paraprofessionals] didn't want to deal with some of

> the really significant behaviors. There was never enough time to properly train these people before they ever worked with the students. (Interview, December 3, 2020)

Leann described how disparate resources and student needs shaped the school spaces in which she worked. She understood students at Bradbury to have more “behaviors” and “trauma” than students at Marshall, having previously invoked the disproportionate amount of homelessness and poverty that students at Bradbury experience relative to those at Marshall. Though district disciplinary reports do not confirm differences in student behavior, district data on poverty and special education identification confirmed 21% of Marshall’s student population were classified as economically disadvantaged relative to 70% at Bradbury. Leann linked these elements to Bradbury’s ability to retain paraprofessionals, noting that paraprofessionals leave Bradbury because of student behaviors and limited training and implying that Marshall’s consistent staffing relates to the school’s student body and their ability to support paraprofessionals, whose complex work is discussed in a previous chapter.

Cassie, by contrast, worked solely at Thompson and split her time between the roles of RTSE and Behavioral Support Coach. She was in her fifth year in the RTSE role at Thompson, having worked there as a speech and language pathologist and special education teacher prior to her appointment as RTSE. The school had a model in which staff members, such as the school counselor, acted as designated social-emotional coaches for each grade level and dispersed some RTSE responsibilities among multiple staff members. Cassie described how her time was split between her work as RTSE and as a Behavioral Support Coach:

> So, I’m at Thompson full-time but in two different roles. I do my special education job, and then I also do something that’s more like — it’s termed under like a PBS [Positive Behavioral Supports] coach, but it’s really our [student support] service delivery, in

general for the whole building of how we do our work is very collaborative at Thompson. So, we have a model where every teaching team has an instructional coach and then also has a social-emotional coach. I serve [as social-emotional coach] on several teams, and so teachers every week at Thompson sit down in whatever format that we're in each week for at least an hour and we facilitate that with the two coaches. And then we are their go-to people for whatever change they need to make, whatever work they're doing. And then also we are kind of like resource brokers within the building so that [teachers] don't have to navigate the huge system. We do the whole thing for them. We help them with whatever they need. So, I do that half-time. (Interview, December 15, 2020)

Rather than navigating a similar role across distinct spaces, Cassie described managing two sets of responsibilities in a single space. These differing responsibilities complemented one another, as they both required working with teacher teams, discussing students, and brokering access to resources.

Cassie's capacity to manage both roles also related to the school's organizational model, which she further described as follows:

> We call them 'point' — 'point people,' so your point person or your social-emotional coach is oftentimes the person who has the second-best relationship with a family who has an IEP, so we are like resource brokers for the staff and also for families that we're regularly engaging with. […] They also — they really help with the LEA representation that RTSEs do a lot of, so, like, they do more of like the annual IEPs, the ones that are like more run-of-the-mill, not really specialized, so that is really helpful because that increases my ability to do other work. (Interview, December 15, 2020)

Cassie noted that the structure of special education programming at her school and full-time employment at Thompson allowed her flexibility to engage in a variety of tasks. This model dispersed the responsibilities of the RTSE among staff members by grade level rather than concentrating the responsibility for all tasks in the RTSE role. As a result, Cassie had flexibility to address "other work," as described in the next section, and also referenced work with families that was absent from Leann's description. This contrast may relate to Leann's position navigating two schools and feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities she managed. At the outset of their positions, Cassie held more bandwidth to address teacher concerns than Leann due to her work being organized within one school rather than two.

Who Holds the Power? RTSE Orientations Toward Their Work

RTSEs supported initial evaluations and intervention team meetings (SSIT) while also facilitating weekly special education team meetings within their schools. Both RTSEs also reported filling in for special education assistants when substitute vacancies were unfilled. Despite the responsibilities outlined in the RTSE job description, Leann and Cassie held different orientations toward the role as informed by their settings and differently structured positions.

Leann framed the RTSE role as having responsibility for various processes but little power in terms of evaluating staff. Leann explains:

> So, it's always hard to explain this role because it's really — it's really an odd thing. So, it's kind of like a director of special ed for one building. *But you have no power.* I don't do any type of [staff] evaluations. I don't do any reprimands or anything like that. That is very much not the role. What I do is I provide professional development to all of the special ed teachers, the OT, speech, PT. And I think that's all the areas. So, all of the student services, basically, that handles special ed….I provide professional development.

> I do the initial evaluations for all those areas. I participate in the intervention team. So, I do that as well. (Interview, December 3, 2020, emphasis added)

This framing indicates that Leann sees herself as lacking authority or power over anyone else's work, with facilitation of professional development taking a primary position in her understanding of her role. The professional development to which she refers typically was district-disseminated and comprised advising special education staff on the completion of paperwork, as outlined by district, compliance-based expectations. Observations of three special education team meetings support this assessment, as Leann focused on sharing district guidance with members of special education staff regarding a flurry of deadlines and paperwork, rather than contributing to discussions of caseloads, schedules, or staff assignments.

Leann further described the various elements she saw as influencing her work, or those elements that held power over her engagement with daily responsibilities.

> I mean, the paperwork is all the same. Like, we have to do all that. It has to be the 60-day timeline. So, that all guides where we have to go with things. I feel like so much of what we do is often subjective. It's very much like IEP-based, student-based, building-based….[D]istrict gives a lot of guidance on how they want things done. […] But in all honesty, I think FSD gives these guidelines knowing full well that principals are going to do what they want that fits with their building. And that's what each of them very much do. So really, I'd say any parameters on anything really comes from the building. (Interview, December 3, 2020)

Leann spoke to a nuanced understanding of what constituted compliance when speaking to the factors that shape her work, understanding the "subjective" nature of special education services on a student-by-student and building-by-building basis. In this statement, though she identifies

paperwork, student needs, and district guidance as holding some sway, she emphasizes the role of principals, or "the building," in determining the nature of her work.

Further descriptions in which Leann centers the legal and procedural aspects of special education provide insight into her orientation toward the role. In the following, she positions herself as a bridge between Bradbury teachers and the district central office ("Downtown"), ensuring compliance at the school level and documenting spending on resources at the district level:

> I also do all of the purchasing for special ed. So, anything that we need, it has to be linked to an IEP. So, when staff comes to me and says they want X, Y or Z, then I have to link it to an IEP and submit that to Downtown. And that's a lot of back and forth. And let's see. Any new teachers, too, I help them with, like, all the new processes, you know, like how to even get on to Oasis [the student management database]. The district does some. But we kind of fill in whatever gaps we're missing. …[O]ftentimes, that's the biggest part of this job is first of all, the initial evaluations, but then helping others out to do the paperwork because we do have turnover, not so much, at least this year. But the last couple years, there's been, at least at Bradbury and my other building, too. So anyway, so we have to get the people, you know, the people that come in up to speed and getting everything done in compliance. (Interview, December 3, 2020)

Overall, Leann positioned herself amid multiple dynamics, influenced by district policies (purchasing), federal policies (initial evaluations), and employment trends born of the pandemic and school contexts (staff turnover). She notes the importance of completing tasks "in compliance," though without authority over building level processes or contributing to staff evaluations.

Cassie differently framed her work as RTSE, illuminating how the differential structure of her position relative to Leann's shaped the responsibilities of that work. As Cassie was in Thompson full-time, though split between two roles, she was more embedded and involved in her school community. Her orientation was seemingly more of a Thompson staff member than a district representative or a district go-between.

Cassie's orientation as a member of a school-based team were apparent in her descriptions of job responsibilities, which mirrored many of the responsibilities described by Leann. She explained:

> So initial evaluations, thinking about potential referrals, and sometimes that can go on for years, so thinking about what level of intervention we can try before we go to referral. So that's one thing, and then also we have the MTSS [multi-tiered system of supports] side, thinking about how we're doing all of our assessments, what's giving us the best information, how are we using that in our team on a regular basis. What else do we — I run all of the case management team meetings, so not a super big role. It's like as coach for all of the special educators within the building, so that — and at Thompson, that really includes anyone who's a case manager, so it's not just cross-categorical teachers. It's also — we're also the hub for deaf and hard of hearing and that also includes — like, we include speech and language, so sometimes it's really just like case management, team meetings. But then we also have large special education meetings where it's all of the related service providers and just figuring out how best to serve families and to make it the best experience for everyone involved. (Interview, December 15, 2020)

Though Cassie and Leann described similar responsibilities, Cassie emphasized her collaboration in school-based teams (MTSS) and facilitation of discussions (case management team meetings),

framing her role as that of a coach rather than a conduit of district guidance. She described running special education team meetings as "not a super big role," indicating that this aspect of her work is minimal in relation to her other responsibilities or not how she spends a majority of her time. This also could point to the capacity of other professionals within those meetings to actively pursue discussion.

Cassie indicated holding a different level of agency in her role as RTSE. As Cassie described:

> But there's a lot of compliance work, which isn't necessarily like — it doesn't necessarily always equate some meaningful experience or things that are great for families. So, a lot of times I think at Thompson I serve as a buffer from what's coming from central office or some — like federal — I'm trying to make a buffer so that they're able — I'll do some of the — more of the compliance-ended things so that they are able to be free to actually engage with kids. (Interview, December 15, 2020)

As opposed to Leann's perception that the RTSE role held no formal authority to enforce practices, Cassie spoke to exerting influence to buffer staff from varied responsibilities and to build teacher capacity. Cassie's framing of power alludes to her capacity to shape the conditions in which special education staff functioned, whereas Leann's previously described understanding of power aligns with her ability to evaluate how staff are performing their work. They differently situate power as influence over teachers versus influence to support teachers. Whereas Leann understood her role as one with limited power, Cassie saw herself as holding a more active role in shaping the special education programming taking place at Thompson.

Conflict and Cooperation: RTSE Relationships with Staff

Leann and Cassie's differential orientations toward their work played out in their interactions and perceived relationships with their broader school communities, particularly special education teachers. Underlying Leann's approach was her rejection of a perceived expectation that RTSEs were to be independent entities in school buildings. In an interview, Leann explained her understanding of why the RTSE role was appointed by central office rather than from within schools. She noted:

> And I guess the reason for that has been just to be like an outside person to give, like, different perspective. When you're in a building, you feel like that's your home building. And you have to get along, go along with everybody. And the idea behind this position is that we're able to kind of be more of a — I don't know — a different mind, so to speak, and be able to see it a different way. Although, I don't know if I see it that way. You know, I really feel like I'm in a building, I'm there to fight for those teachers. And that's how I do it. I'm there to fight for the kids, too, because we're doing initial evaluations. And who wants to see a kid struggle? (Interview, December 3, 2020)

Leann describes the RTSE role as somewhat structurally detached from schools, noting that the position aims to minimize the sense that the RTSE has a "home building." Though she rebukes aspects of this description and expresses acting as a general advocate for the teachers and students with whom she works, she ascribes her responsibility to teachers and students as defined by her placement in the school "building" as opposed to her membership within a school community.

Leann's participation in weekly special education meetings illustrated her position as a bridge between Bradbury and the district with a focus on compliance. In these meetings, Leann shared information regarding paperwork expectations, such as PWNs, additional services forms,

and extended school year paperwork, and district deadlines. She offered to follow up with the district office when expectations were unclear regarding paperwork or deadlines, but left negotiations of staffing and caseloads to remaining team members. In November and January special education meetings, Leann noted how “downtown” noticed or appreciated the hard work that special education teachers were doing, positioning herself as a messenger on the behalf of central office.

Leann facilitated several conversations regarding the additional services process, acting as a facilitator and resource. For example, during an observation in November, Leann asked special education teachers for their questions regarding the additional services process. This process was a state- and district-initiated attempt to identify which students required the equivalence of compensatory services as marked by missed instruction and lagging goals. Special education teachers had a range of questions: What should teachers note for goals that are in the child’s IEP but aren’t happening because of virtual instruction, such as toileting? What about student goals that revolve around general education instruction that isn’t happening in the virtual format? Who is going to plan the services—the student’s present special education teacher or the additional services teacher? Leann responded repeatedly that the territory was murky and offered to reach out to the district for clarification but was unable to provide a clear answer herself for most questions. Ultimately, Leann acted as a conduit for district advice on how to approach the roles and then a line through which special education teachers’ concerns could be directed to the district.

In practice, special education teachers mostly saw Leann as someone to reach out to for consultation on specific paperwork questions. Tiffany, a special education teacher, encapsulated most special education teacher’s descriptions of interactions with Leann: “It’s a lot of email

questions or asking Leann questions on Wednesday during the meetings that you've attended. Or just if I have a question about a form, I'll be like, 'Okay, can you help me solve this?' Or usually via email." Tiffany and other special education teachers positioned Leann as a resource for ad hoc issues.

Special education teachers' orientations to Leann's work also mapped on to their perceived availability of their RTSE and confidence in her capacity to adequately address concerns. Greta mentioned feeling frustrated that Leann did not know families well because of her part-time status in the building, as evidenced in an IEP meeting in which she referenced several erroneous facts about a student to both Greta and the parent's frustration. Gina, a related service provider, and Tess, another special education teacher, both referenced emailing Leann for support managing situations in which students were not provided with adequate support. Yet, Leann remained mostly uninvolved until the assistant district administrator became involved in these situations. These frustrations also indicated differing expectations regarding the role, which Leann primarily described as supporting teachers in complying with district tasks while special education teachers seemed to expect more apparent support in navigating daily challenges of practice.

Nigel, Bradbury's principal, expressed general dissatisfaction with how Leann enacted the RTSE role. He shared several instances in which he perceived the RTSE as not contributing meaningfully to the special education team and noted that, though the district hired Leann, her salary came from Bradbury's budget. Nigel explained:

> I do feel like if you're going to have somebody who's hired by central office, and has a pay raise that indicates that they're some way above the rank of a teacher, in between teacher and principal…and they're assigned to Special Ed, and they can't do things like

> help lead a team or balance caseloads, well, then, what the hell are they doing there? And I want my money back. And or I would rather have somebody else like Aubrey, who I know would take that responsibility and say, 'This is my sandbox, and I'm going to make sure that it's managed to the best of my ability.' (Interview, January 26, 2021)

Nigel indicated that the tasks in which Leann engaged did not consistently reflect the needs of the school or his expectation that the RTSE would take on a stronger leadership role. He also read her lack of involvement in determining caseloads as a lack of competence, rather than an active interpretation of the role's responsibilities.

Nigel's expectations of the RTSE role were grounded in his prior experiences with RTSEs. He explained:

> We had, I think, really good leadership under Cathy and Aubrey [in their role as RTSEs]. I think, like a team was able to mostly work pretty well together and figure out challenges. That they were the ones through that belief in kind of teacher leadership and good faith, that I felt like for several years, I was pretty lucky to let the special ed teachers kind of navigate their own caseloads. And they were able to say, 'Oh, your case load's is getting pretty big. Let me take one for you,' or something, some way to work in partnership. […] Then we had some leadership challenges and changes that resulted in some very inequitable caseloads, and it was visible, and it was toxic. Basically, Pat [former special education teacher] had two students in her caseload and would sit in a room all day and had like two paraprofessionals with her and other people would have 15 [students] and be struggling. (Interview, January 26, 2021)

Nigel notes that Cathy and Aubrey, former RTSEs, demonstrated "good leadership," which he then qualifies as ensuring that caseloads are equitably distributed and engagement in

collaboration to "figure out challenges." He then notes that leadership changes took place, alluding to Leann's appointment to the RTSE role, under which caseloads became inequitably distributed. In addition to providing historical perspective regarding Nigel's orientation to the current RTSE role, this excerpt also provides background for his below-described involvement in special education programming at Bradbury.

Nigel went so far as to repeatedly email the district administrator regarding the position of RTSE, particularly Leann's enactment of the role, following an issue with a student who did not initially receive the services outlined by their IEP. He also circulated an email to special education teachers regarding the RTSE's job description, which elicited surprised reactions from special education teachers regarding the extent of support they could receive from the RTSE. Tess, a special education teacher, described her reaction:

> We were given a job description of the RTSE, which was shocking to read because I really had only talked to Leann twice my entire first year. I didn't know who she was. And then reading through … what her role is and how she's an instructional coach. I had no idea that I could have — I should have been getting modeling from her on, 'Here's how I would deal with this very difficult student, now you try,' you know, that kind of thing. So that got a little better this year, where after we all got that email, I think maybe we all understood what we can expect from her and started asking for it a little more. (Interview, January 26, 2021)

Tess underscored a general lack of clarity at Bradbury regarding the RTSE role. She then noted that she started "asking" for more from Leann. However, Nigel's circulation of the role and teachers' surprise at the description indicates a lack of communication or lack of shared understanding about the RTSE role and the responsibilities associated it.

Nigel felt that Leann's performance as a RTSE did not meet Bradbury's needs, expecting that she contribute to the management of caseloads and take a stronger approach to leading special education teacher. However, Leann differently interpreted Nigel's open criticism of the RTSE role:

> Nigel and I had kind of like a heart to heart about [the RTSE role] because he really struggles with the fact that I'm not a Bradbury employee and feels at times that I am—he's never said it, but he kind of feels like that, sometimes, I'm more of a district employee and telling Downtown what we're doing. And so maybe tattling? I don't know. (Interview, December 3, 2020)

Leann framed the tension regarding the RTSE role in terms of the ambiguity of her position within the school and district, referencing her responsibilities outside of the school building as detrimental to building trust within the building rather than in terms of her execution of the "guidance" aspect of her work. Nigel's broader resistance to district-based compliance, as described in the following section, may inform this perspective, as does his feeling that the role should be building-based, rather than district-based, as it comes out of the school's budget.

Cassie, on the other hand, identified strongly as a member of the Thompson community. Like Leann, part of her role as RTSE was to bridge the school and the district. However, she was strongly embedded in the Thompson community, working there full-time as RTSE and PBS coach. Cassie had also worked at Thompson as a teacher prior to her appointment as RTSE. She thusly had a strong understanding of school culture and routines and previously established relationships with staff. Her understanding of herself as a member in the Thompson community is evident in her discussion of the referral process:

> At Thompson, our core beliefs are focused on race and equity, so we're really working from the bottom up in terms of our demographics because we know that the outcomes aren't great for special education for kids who are kids of color, so we do our best to work on problem-solving at the — at other levels before we get to referral. (Interview, December 15, 2020)

Cassie aligned herself with Thompson, using "we" in reference to the school community and taking ownership of outcomes for students in her school. Questions of allegiance to the district or to Thompson did not arise in the same way as they did for Leann, as Cassie saw herself as embedded, integral part of the Thompson community.

Cassie demonstrated this orientation in regard to additional services paperwork. Rather than requiring special education teachers to complete additional services forms, Cassie took on the task of populating these forms with data. As opposed to Bradbury special education teachers, who engaged in additional services conversations and troubleshooting starting in November, Thompson's special education teachers initially navigated to the additional services forms that Cassie had filled out in March. The teacher's sole responsibility in relation to additional services was to print the forms and send them to families for their review, whereas Bradbury's teachers had been more engaged in the process.

These different orientations held practical implications for the work of special education teachers. Cassie—viewing her role as a buffer to allow special education teachers to engage with students and as a staff member at the school---engaged in more extensive support of special education staff. She took on administrative tasks and completed paperwork outside of her formal role for the special education team so that individual teachers did not have to manage this responsibility on top of their instructional demands. Leann instructed teachers as to how to

approach these forms but did not undertake them of her own accord. This could reflect a temporal limitation, as she had twice as many students with staff situated in differing school cultures. Though Cassie also had another job that she worked part time, her colleagues remained the same and her separate jobs often overlapped in terms of the students with whom she worked.

Brenda, a special education teacher who worked with Cassie at Thompson, attested to the importance of her principal and Cassie's support, particularly during the pandemic. She described:

> Something else that is really helpful is Evan and Cassie, my RTSE. They are very sensitive to how hard special ed is working. And they're talking a lot about the inequities of it. And they're doing things that they can to support us. And like, for example, with my 13 kids, I had four re-evals and 13 IEPs. Four re-evals by the end of February. Right? And so, I said — my RTSE said, 'What can I do to help?' And someone is like, 'Well, I could take running records.' And I'm like, 'No, because I need to see what they're doing. You giving me a running record doesn't give me the same data,' you know? So anyway, [Cassie's] giving two of my re-evals to somebody else.…. this person had zero re-evals and seven kids. And so, she's getting two of my re-evals, and she worked with those kids last year. […] So, like, [Evan and Cassie] are also very aware of the pandemic issues, the special ed stuff, and they've been very supportive, as supportive as they can be. (Interview, October 7, 2020)

Brenda notes feeling seen by Cassie, who is "sensitive to how hard special ed is working." Further, she described Cassie's active management of special education teacher caseloads to balance teacher workloads, working against the "inequities" that arise when balancing the needs of multiple students. This description contrasts with that of Leann, who Nigel criticized for

failing to balance caseloads.

However, not all staff reported working closely with Cassie. Laura, another special education teacher at Thompson, notes: “We’ll see her for meetings, for our CC meetings. But otherwise, I don’t work with her regularly. …If I have a question, I’ll email or hunt her down if we’re in-person, you know.” Laura references a similar orientation to Cassie as some of Bradbury’s teachers have to Leann. She frames her as an ad hoc point of reference, harkening back to the “on-call” model that the district administrator intentionally aimed to disrupt. The dispersal of RTSE responsibilities among multiple staff members per Thompson’s “point-person” model may further inform this; Laura’s limited interactions with Cassie may result from the involvement of another staff member in meeting Laura’s other special education programming needs.

Evan, Thompson’s principal, described Cassie as a close team member and integral part of the staff. He spoke to Cassie’s role in creating a supportive culture in special education at Thompson:

> [O]ur district has a position called [Resource Teacher for Special Education], which essentially is the person who kind of manages the scheduling of and monitoring IEP deadlines. And in a sense, the manager also kind of — is intended to take on the role of almost like a coach for special education. And finding that position is really critical, too, and schools have varying degrees of quality in that position. And we’ve been fortunate to have someone really high quality and she’s so good. I’ve actually added to our allocation to have her here full-time because of that. (Interview, February 1, 2021)

Evan understands the RTSE role as managerial and compliance oriented, describing core tasks of being a “coach” as well as “manag[ing] the scheduling of and monitoring IEP deadlines.” He

notes his overall satisfaction with Cassie's work as a RTSE, referring to her work as "really high quality." He further describes allocating his school budget to fund her presence at the school full-time in light of her success in the role. Cassie's full-time presence at Thompson may contribute to this positive relationship, which iteratively cements the security of her full-time role. It is important to recognize, however, that Cassie and Evan had a prior professional relationship from their time working at Thompson together before Cassie's involvement in the RTSE role. Unlike Leann, who entered Bradbury part-time without prior familiarity with the school, Cassie moved to the RTSE role from another role within Thompson and therefore had a greater depth of knowledge regarding the school's organizational culture and needs as well as previously established relationships and potential founts of relational trust with other staff members.

The role of RTSE took on a different tenor when wielded by Leann and Cassie in these distinct settings. Cassie's full-time employment at Thompson allowed for a more creative approach to the RTSE role and dispersal of responsibilities due to her daily presence in the school building. Leann was unable to disperse these responsibilities accordingly, in part due to the split of the position between two buildings and received criticism for how she did or did not manage the responsibilities of her work. As a result, special education teachers at Thompson received RTSE support completing their additional services forms and balancing their caseloads—practices that importantly freed up SET time—whereas those at Bradbury mostly received advice on meeting district guidelines from their RTSE. In this way, special education teachers at Bradbury occupied a more siloed position than their peers at Thompson when navigating the demands of their jobs. As demonstrated in the next section, RTSE approaches also informed principal involvement in special education programming.

RTSE Enactments Shape Administrative Involvement

Principals' leadership styles intersected with different enactment of the RTSE role in special education team spaces. At Bradbury, this meant that special education teachers had more contact with and oversight from their principals, whereas at Thompson, this oversight was less intensive. Nigel's orientation to teacher autonomy was tempered by his distrust in Leann as the RTSE, resulting in his heightened involvement in special education decisions. By contrast, Evan did not face complications with the RTSE role and maintained his approach of autonomy-within-compliance, even when placed in a position to more directly dictate the work of special education teachers. Special education teachers at these sites therefore navigated different personnel dynamics in relation to their work.

As noted the study context, Nigel situated his increased involvement in special education programming and case allocation within Bradbury's special education team dynamics.

> It was clear that [special education teachers and leaders] weren't thinking, that students' needs weren't — I mean, they should be at the top, but they should at least be in like the top two or three. It wasn't clear that that was anywhere near the highest consideration. It was really all about who is the loudest voice in the room, and so who gets the most resources. So, I formally took that power away. But now that Pat is assigned as a classroom teacher, I told them I'm happy for them to try to figure this out. Because I do think it can be bonding to rely on a teammate, you know, like, 'Hey, I'm overworked.' Or 'Can you help me with this?' But there's always going to be some degree of potential inequity without a principal, kind of like oversight. (Interview, 1/26/21)

Nigel explains that too much teacher autonomy resulted in unfair distribution of labor for special education teachers under Leann's leadership. After observing that students' needs were not being met, he exerted administrative influence and "took that power away" from the special education

team in terms of determining their caseloads. He noted a plan to transfer power to determine caseloads back to teachers after a team member that he previously identified as problematic was no longer involved in special education. However, he mentioned that without his involvement, there is "potential inequity," acknowledging that providing teachers with autonomy does not always result in teaching practices that best support students or teachers. This quote emphasizes how Nigel exerted administrative power to disrupt practices within the special education program with which he disagreed.

Special education teachers at Bradbury reported Nigel's involvement in special education program decisions. When asked about caseload determinations, Katie suggested that Nigel took control over the caseload determination process to make caseloads more equitable, while also taking in teacher input. Bradbury special education teacher Katie summarized:

> So, Nigel ended up kind of taking over a little bit more of that role. I guess he used to let the teachers decide, but it seemed that some teachers would have 15 kids, some would only have 6, and so I think he was like, I'm gonna try and do this myself and let it be more creative. But he also asked for our input. (Interview, 2/10/21)

In thinking about Nigel's role, Katie referenced back to a time when caseloads became unbalanced.

Nigel demonstrated varied levels of engagement in special education team meetings. At a meeting in November, he listened and provided feedback regarding varied issues, as in the following excerpt:

> About halfway through the meeting, that has been about additional services paperwork up until this point, Nigel chimes in to note that he's there to support however he can. He also brings up the paraprofessional issue that Greta dealt with yesterday in which the

> paraprofessional told Greta that she would not be able to cover afternoon classes with an hour's notice. He notes that there are 'no subs anywhere so we need to have open communication with paraprofessionals that support you to get advanced notice if they are going to be out.' He urges special education teachers to have a 'just in case plan', such as having students do Lexia, in the case of unfilled paraprofessional absences. (Observation, November 18, 2020)

Nigel asserts his willingness to support the team and then shifts the conversation to an area in which he has noted challenges: staffing. He then provides background context regarding the unfilled paraprofessional absences with which some team members have been grappling ("there are no subs anywhere") and suggests that teachers have a backup plan to respond to inevitable paraprofessional absences. While Nigel isn't prescriptive about having a backup plan, he feels empowered to share his perspective regarding how to address absences.

In a notable instance, Nigel took an even more active role in special education decision making. An emotional special education team meeting in February revolved around return-to-school personal protective equipment and instructional protocols, staffing, and a public dispute between a family and the district:

> The team is examining a spreadsheet detailing teacher caseloads and paraprofessional support. Nigel is talking about how he can't hire paraprofessionals until March 5th because of an internal hiring deadline and how they will later be able to request another paraprofessional as Shannon, an existing paraprofessional, will be working in-person.
>
> Tiffany, who presently works with Shannon, says, 'Wait, so am I losing Shannon? Sorry, I haven't heard this.' Nigel notes that this is possible because the situation around a

> particular student is complicated and 'delicate', and the family has been through mediation. There has been a quick turnaround in terms of responses from the district, starting with the district would not send any staff into the home, to sending in a paraprofessional if they volunteered to go in, to requiring Bradbury to send someone into the student's home to work with them. He explains that Shannon is the best fit for the legally tricky situation. Though the district administrator noted that the student will only need two hours of in-home paraprofessional support, Tori, the student's special education teacher, said that they will need closer to 5 hours of support.
>
> Nigel then says to the team, 'I'm sorry if I'm sounding callous. It's not lost on me that we are on the brink of a lot of probably changes with staffing and caseloads and stuff. […] One of my questions is 'Who are those kids who need a lot of support, etc., when they come back?'' He says that these are the students who need 'heavy paraprofessional investment' and that they need to prioritize from a school-wide perspective.
>
> Tiffany seems crestfallen, noting that she 'spent weeks training [Shannon] in bilingual instruction' and that not many paraprofessionals can deliver the bilingual instruction that the student needs. Nigel mentions that two former paraprofessionals have expressed interest in coming back. 'I know it sucks.' Dee [another paraprofessional] has volunteered to go into the home, but Nigel isn't comfortable sending her into a student's home because Dee is in a high-risk category. (Observation, February 24, 2021)

Nigel exerts a large amount of influence in this special education meeting. Despite his skeptical orientation toward compliance, he disrupts paraprofessional assignments across his special

education team to serve a student at the center of a public dispute with the district. This indicates a bounding of Nigel's approach to autonomy when federal laws are in play, and also a recentering of Nigel as the administrator who controls special education programming at Bradbury rather than Leann. He notes consulting with the district administrator and evolving district guidance regarding how to deal with this situation. Rather than rebuking this guidance, Nigel prioritizes the reassignment of the school's sole paraprofessional trained in bilingual intervention to work with the student in question at their home, despite the fact that the student does not receive Spanish instruction as part of their IEP. Further, he notes that though another paraprofessional volunteered to do so, he will not send her into the student's home due to her risk of exposure, indicating on one hand some paternalism in terms of control over staff and their choices or, on the other hand, a longer view towards ensuring that as many paraprofessionals possible remain healthy and able to work at Bradbury.

In either case, though Nigel generally favors teacher autonomy and school-level decision making, this example demonstrates that there are limits to his commitment to this autonomy. The looming threat of a lawsuit intersected with staffing trends in Bradbury's special education programming and distrust of the RTSE, compelling Nigel to exert control over school-based changes rather than leaving it to special education team members. On one hand, this level of control can limit teachers' ability to apply professional judgment to their work; on the other, it places the responsibility of non-compliance on Nigel, rather than special education staff, should the family in question move forward with litigation against the district. This course of action held implications for special education teachers, who would then need to grapple with the practical impact of staffing shifts. It also marked that Nigel held different leadership orientations toward special education teachers, whose autonomy to problem solve the complex situation he limited.

Initially, Evan couched much of his involvement in special education around compliance. Evan described his job in the context of the pandemic, alluding to the additional paperwork required by special education programming in response to the pandemic:

> So, it's been like an extra layer of work that [special education teachers] — on top of what they're already doing, what they have been doing, right, so it's more. I understand why, right, from a legal perspective, and the reality is we're just in such an unprecedented time that it's very difficult to rationalize it sometimes. And so, my role really becomes of like, 'OK, this sucks, right, and it's something we have to do.' (Interview, February 1, 2021)

Evan mentions that the unprecedented nature of COVID has messily converged with legal aspects of special education, to the extent that undertaking these responsibilities is difficult to "rationalize." Rather than questioning or disrupting the rationale, however, Evan notes that his role is to ensure teachers engage in compliance regardless of the nature of the task and their perceived utility thereof.

In an observation, Evan exemplified his approach of "freedom within fences" or teacher autonomy within bounds. In their monthly special education team meeting in March of 2021, the team was discussing the return to in-person schooling. They collectively examined a spreadsheet detailing teacher caseloads and discussed how paraprofessionals and special education teachers might be able to support specific tasks for students across caseloads, referencing one student in particular. In Cassie's absence, Evan emphasized the need to prioritize compliance with federal policy. In field notes taken during the meeting:

> Brenda notes that as one teacher has to walk the student out to the bus, someone else will have to get another student settled at that time. Evan responds that they are looking to

> special ed staff to figure it out, and the negotiation of these logistics might require smaller conversations between practitioners.
>
> Another special education teacher asks if rewriting a child's PWN might help with minutes, suggesting they edit the student's paperwork to provide fewer service minutes to the student to make scheduling feasible. Evan suggests using a grade level teacher for support minutes, making sure other people can support bathrooming, arrival, departure, and recess. He then suggests that next steps require hashing out details from a scheduling perspective between another special education teacher and Brenda and asking the grade level teacher about their involvement. (Observation, March 22, 2021)

In this example, Evan is consistent with his orientation toward providing teachers with autonomy to navigate these issues. In discussing next steps, Evan referenced district requirements and offered to email the assistant director of special education on behalf of the special education team regarding a question on student qualification for summer school. Evan then notes that the negotiation of logistics requires smaller conversations between practitioners, as opposed to his prescription.

While Evan's actions are consistent with his leadership philosophy of bounded autonomy, this move also effectively removes him from an advisory or coaching role for teachers as they approach these decisions. However, Evan then suggested using the grade level teacher for support as an alternative to a special education teacher's suggestion to rewrite a student's PWN. His suggestion is made as an offering of how to ensure that special education programming should comply with existing services outlined, rather than changing the services that the student would receive to facilitate compliance. However, this could also suggest a lack

of understanding of what a PWN entails. Following his suggestion that the grade level teacher be involved with student supports, he then notes that Linda and Brenda should hash out the details and check in with the grade level teacher. In alignment with his perspective that teachers can be trusted to handle the details of decisions that he has effectively made for them, Evan generally encouraged special education teachers to navigate the division of labor for meeting this student's needs and to address issues of special education among themselves more generally.

Principals' understandings and experiences with the RTSE roles informed how and to what extent they engaged in special education programming decisions. Nigel strayed from his initial orientation toward teacher autonomy, while Evan maintained his initial orientation to leadership.. These cases hold implications for how interactions between principals and coaches can create a ripple effect that shapes special education programming.

Conclusion

Enactments of the RTSE role were informed by the structure of the role itself, school contexts, and RTSEs understandings and orientations toward the role. Principal perceptions of the RTSE role then informed how principals did or did not involve themselves in special education programming decisions. The RTSE role consequently held implications for special education teachers, both in terms of the support they actually received from the RTSE as well as the ensuing involvement of principals in special education.

Bradbury had experienced several changes in terms of special education programming over the past years as a result of their administrators. The culture and assumptions of the RTSE role at Bradbury meant that special education teachers had a resource in Leann to ask regarding how to perform tasks, but minimal assistance in actually executing these tasks. Moreover, Leann did not see managing special education teachers and their caseloads as part of her work and she

did not take on this role. Upon Leann's entrance to the RTSE role then, there was a leadership gap that contributed to inequitably distributed caseloads and resources. This prompted Bradbury's principal, Nigel, to get more involved in special education programming. In some ways this led to more equitable distribution of responsibilities, but in other ways limited teacher power to approach challenges. Further, as Leann identified strongly with the district, special education teachers at Bradbury generally experienced the full brunt of special education policy expectations amid the complexities wrought by the pandemic.

Thompson's special education model was relatively well-established, with RTSE responsibilities dispersed among multiple staff members. This dispersal provided multiple points of contact for special education teachers in need of support. Further, the flexibility of Cassie's unique roles and her orientation to her work enabled her to take on some of the external responsibilities for special education teachers and provide them with more time to address other concerns. Though Evan had a compliance-based approach to leadership, Cassie's role as a buffer maintained some level of flexibility for special education teachers at Thompson as she took on district-based paperwork.

Administrative Buffering Held Implications for Special Education Teachers

As discussed in the literature, buffering is a strategy employed by school administrators to shelter staff members from external demands (Honig & Hatch 2002). At Thompson, Cassie functioned as a buffer of district-level compliance activities for special education. Though Evan did not act as a buffer, Cassie's capacity to do so in her role as RTSE had practical implications for special education teachers. Namely, Cassie addressed paperwork intended to be completed by special education teachers, which then freed them to complete other tasks. This buffering of state and district policy gave teachers more flexibility to grapple with other aspects of their work. And

provided a level of emotional recognition and support during a difficult time. Though Cassie was not a principal, she exerted the power of her position to shelter special education teachers from aspects of compliance work. Consequently, individuals at varied levels are capable of buffering in an impactful way.

Role Structure and Responsibility Determination

Leann and Cassie demonstrated how the subjective enactment of the RTSE position held meaningful consequences. Leann functioned as an arm of the district. She noted struggling to manage the responsibilities split across two schools and felt this logistical aspect of her work undermined her ability to take on her job. Her engagement with her work, with which several of her Bradbury colleagues took issue, may have been a symptom of being stretched too thin. By contrast, Cassie was part of a single school community and took on differing roles therein. Her engagement was further supported by dispersed RTSE responsibilities, made possible by her continued onsite presence to assure that these responsibilities were, in fact, being met. Further, as paperwork is reported as a major source of burnout for special education teachers (Hale, 2015), Cassie's engagement with this task alleviated a burden with which Leann's special education teachers grappled. While Leann's assignment embodied breadth, working with students, school-based staff, and assistant directors for schools serving differently aged students, in different organizational contexts, and geographically distinct locales, Cassie's assignment emphasized breadth in addition to depth, working with the same students, teachers, and administrators repeatedly and across multiple domains.

These different formal responsibilities influenced how Leann and Cassie respectively established relationships with their schools and informed the development of trust between RTSEs and school staff. Whereas Cassie and Evan worked closely together, and Brenda

expressed her appreciation of Cassie's support, particularly during a very intense and stressful time, Leann and Nigel held disparate understandings of the RTSE role, and several staff members expressed frustration with what they perceived to be Leann's lack of capacity. In addition to the full-time versus part-time differences in their RTSE roles, Cassie had more opportunities to build trust with colleagues having worked at Thompson longer and in varied capacities.

Discord at Bradbury reflected a lack of agreement and understanding around the role of the RTSE. However, it also may have reflected the dissemination of a school culture of distrust in the RTSE, as outlined by the principal. The extent to which the utility of the RTSE role at Bradbury was a self-fulling prophecy—that is, expectations that Leann was unhelpful spurred an attitude of mistrust, and Leann, in turn did not provide the supports as teachers did not seek her out—is unclear. However, the tenor of this position at Bradbury contrasts with that of Thompson, illuminating how roles can be enacted within schools and how these roles can differently inform the everyday experiences of special education teachers.

Regardless of whether (mis)trust or RTSE enactment occurred first, they developed and informed each other moving forward. At Thompson, there seemed to be a collective agreement regarding RTSE responsibilities, so much so that they could be divided among other staff members. However, at Bradbury, there was confusion and disagreement regarding such responsibilities, with special education teachers lacking understanding regarding what they could expect from a RTSE. Nigel also asserted that RTSEs should advise caseload assignments whereas Leann's description of her work did not include caseloads. The RTSE description with which this chapter opens is decidedly vague: it calls for "technical assistance, support, and

guidance." Consensus or conflict over what these tasks entailed created a ripple effect that impacted the resources and supports available to special education teachers.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This study sought to examine how special education teachers enact IDEA in practice. I asked the following questions:

1. What actions characterize the enactment of special education policy across federal, state, district, and school levels?
2. How do local, state, and federal policies shape the daily work of special education teachers?

I demonstrate that policies and practice across federal, state, and local levels converged with school contexts and special education teachers' logics of compliance to shape ground-level enactments of special education policy. In chapter two, actors across scales differentially emphasized what FAPE entailed and who was responsible for its provision. In chapter three, despite increasing clarification of the paraprofessional role, vague invocations of training and supervision of paraprofessionals throughout local policy clashed against the practical realities of paraprofessional work, particularly during the pandemic. In chapter four, district policy, in the form of a variably enacted RTSE position aimed at promoting compliance with IDEA, and administrative reactions further shaped the workload of special education. Throughout this study, special education teachers at the nexus of these demands managed the enactment of policy amid overlapping policy contexts, acting as street-level bureaucrats and engaging logics of compliance when prioritizing their work.

Empirical Contributions

These findings contribute to a larger body of work that demonstrates the tension between providing flexibility for states and schools and policy vagueness that eliminates parameters for functioning. As demonstrated particularly in chapters two and three, aspects of federal policy are

decidedly vague. This trend can in part be attributed to education federalism and deference to local control over schooling. Yet, as Tefera and Voulgarides (2016, p. 2) point out in their empirical work, "ambiguous policy guidelines coupled with complex local contexts contribute to insufficient changes in schools and to the reproduction of and rise in educational inequalities." In the present study, special education teachers operating within complex instructional contexts but with minimal federal guidance tightened control over some aspects of IDEA—namely, specially designed instruction and adherence to IEP minutes—and ignored others—including providing student access to the entirety of their educational program and training paraprofessionals.

Special education teachers employed a logic of compliance to the detriment of students' other substantive needs, as reflected by other work in this vein (Stelitano, Russell, & Bray, 2019; Voulgarides, 2018) When presented with limited time and vacillating working conditions, special education teachers tightened their control over instructional periods to provide specially designed instruction. Akin to Naraian's (2014) educators, who identified available time as limited their inclusive practices, Greta and Brenda noted that time impeded their provision of FAPE. Also in part due to district directive, special education teachers omitted aspects of students' broader general education program from FAPE and instead focused on the instruction included in their IEPs. Though all students within Firglade district received less instruction from teachers during the pandemic, students with disabilities had specific constrictions that shaped what "less" looked like. Specially designed instruction bit into social times for students with disabilities and prevented one student at SFS from attending recess for several weeks. Adherence to this limited iteration of FAPE thus held the potential to disrupt community connection amid an isolating time.

This study also highlights the nature of policy enactment processes. Actors funneled or narrowed policy as it approached the school level, providing outlines of expectations for special education teachers. However, contextual elements interrupted aspects of policy enactment, with special education teachers rejecting policy when faced with limited time. Further, this work highlights a one-way direction for special education policy co-construction (Datnow, 206) in the time of COVID-19 as driven by notions of responsibility. In the federal and state contexts, responsibility for enactment of policy was assigned as much by who was *not* named as by who was named. Both state and district entities emphasized the responsibility of actors at scales that drew closer to the local, but did not include themselves as parties responsible for supporting compliance. This is in part because the role of these organizations is to govern the levels they encompass; however, it also lends a sense of "passing the buck" to the actors at the next scale.

This study also provides insight into administrators' meaning making regarding job responsibilities and the consequent ramifications when their meanings differ. District policy around the RTSE position clearly delineated a responsible party, though not the tasks in which they were to engage. The position description called for assistance and guidance, but individuals held different interpretations of that which comprised these tasks. Both Cassie and Leann acted as street-level bureaucrats, responding to their responsibilities with personal discretion that in turn impacted the dynamics of special education programming in their schools. Further, Nigel and Leann's differing perspectives regarding the RTSE role resulted in increased administrative involvement in Bradbury's special education program.

Finally, this study demonstrates the applicability of street level bureaucracy in virtual spaces. Vague policy language left special education teachers with significant room to draw on personal discretion when navigating their work. Though teacher autonomy in a time of such

unprecedented instructional upheaval could allow for flexibility and creativity, special education teachers at times experienced this lack of guidance as an absence of scaffolding toward meeting the requirements of federal law. Variations among scheduling practices, caseloads, and instructional formats informed how special education teachers engaged with their responsibilities. These were compounded by vacillating student attendance, issues of internet connectivity, and background noise. In keeping with street-level bureaucracy (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977), special education teachers also referenced their professional understandings and personal priorities when determining their responses.

Theoretical Contributions

This work highlights a tension in the logic of compliance framework. Though Voulgarides uses the concept to specifically highlight racial disproportionality practices, she does so within the broader framing of IDEA. My work attends to two policy aspects found in IDEA: FAPE and paraprofessional training. If special education teachers are to follow policy as written, they must attend to all aspects of IDEA. However, when presented with two aspects of IDEA—FAPE and paraprofessional training—they opted to prioritize FAPE, albeit a limited version thereof. They also dispatched paraprofessionals to work with students to provide some semblance of instruction aligned with these minutes, prioritizing this time over that spent with certified general education teachers. This was in part due to district directive and in-part to prioritize that students with disabilities had time with an adult. However, it also stems from the district's established reliance on paraprofessionals as providers of special education services. This decision indicates a hierarchy of policies within IDEA and the potential for practitioners to demonstrate fragmented logic[s] of compliance when adhering to different aspects of this federal

legislation. Further, by applying the logic of compliance framework to extensive observational data, I show how compliance is codified in the everyday work of special education teachers.

Additionally, my prior research (2021, p. 3) demonstrated that special education teachers dealt with dynamic working conditions, or "specific elements of a practitioner's work that exhibit paradoxically frequent yet unpredictable fluctuations, requiring consequent attention or reactions from the practitioner." In the present study, special education teachers' work comprised reacting to these conditions in virtual environments, whereas my prior research situated working conditions as part of a physical space. This research thus bolsters this concept by emphasizing how factors beyond the physical setting breed dynamic working conditions, which preclude special education teachers' capacities to decipher long term solutions to these fluctuations in daily practice.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This work echoes that of multitudes of scholars (Billingsley et al., 2020; Voulgarides, 2018; Russell & Bray, 2013) who assert that context matters for special education policy. As demonstrated herein, however, context may be such an influential force that it renders aspects of policy irrelevant and counterproductive. This is not to say that we should eliminate legislation codifying the rights of students with disabilities—rather, IDEA requires significant revision or outright replacement. At the very least, reauthorization of IDEA must grapple with how to meaningfully support students with disabilities without violating the foundations on which it was ostensibly founded. As demonstrated herein, when staff enact fragmented versions of IDEA, students with disabilities lose access to the continuum of instructional services to which they are entitled.

Additionally, this work illustrates how supports of special education programs functioned and faltered two schools. Markers of the Thompson RTSE position included development of relationships with teachers and families, flexible distribution of work responsibilities across staff, and embeddedness within schools. By contrast, the role of RTSE at Bradbury was contested among staff, and time constraints and compliance orientation limited engagement with the school community. This study attests to the utility of the RTSE position unique to Firglade, in supporting special education programs , presuming adequate time, flexibility, and mutual understandings of the role.

This study joins other research (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003) demonstrating the importance of resources in the daily lives of practitioners. Herein, resources occupy three interconnected domains: personnel, temporal, and material. Schools need adequate personnel resources, both in terms of filled positions and relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Improving compensation for paraprofessionals could support retention and attendance by reducing the need for these staff members to work second and third jobs, and housing RTSEs in one school could bolster relationships among staff members and improve collective capacity to productively address problems. In terms of temporal resources, special education teachers need time to plan, train, and collaborate with other staff, as well as time to serve the students on their caseload. A first step toward supporting this is ensuring manageable caseloads for special education. Finally, students' material conditions impacted the extent to which they could access instruction in the virtual setting and special education teachers' work. Poverty also impacts student learning and well-being in physical classrooms (Hannaway, 2016). As the wealthiest nation in the world, we can and must engage progressive reforms to support our schools and families through material resources.

The aim of this work is to demonstrate how and why IDEA is enacted and its influence on practice. This is not, however, an absolution of the legislation, or an argument that resources alone will result in equitable special education programming. Rather the framing of IDEA is imbued with inequity at the outset (Etscheidt, Hernandez-Saca, & Voulgarides, 2022). As we grapple with the inequitable distribution of learning opportunities and social emotional impacts of COVID-19, the moment is ripe for a reimagination of schooling and support for all students. If we can attempt to starkly adapt schooling in response to a pandemic, then we can also hit the "hard reset" (Ladson-Billings, 2021) and shift our approach to education in pragmatic and progressive ways.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Special Education Teacher Interview Protocols

Note: These protocols outlined our discussions. At times, I posed follow-up questions regarding participant work as it related to special education.

Interview 1

Through this interview I aim to build rapport, gain insight into how the daily work of participants is structured, and identify areas for further analysis.

Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me to talk about your experiences as a special education teacher. I'm interested in learning about your experiences as a teacher at this school.

How did you become a teacher at this school?

How would you describe this school to an incoming family?

Details of work

How would you describe your role to someone unfamiliar to special education?

Probe for job responsibilities pre and post-COVID-19.

How is special education programming structured in your school?

Probe for inclusive practices, personnel involved, resources for professional support, pre and post COVID-19.

Could you describe a typical day to me?

Follow up: How did you decide on that schedule/ order of events? How have your days changed in light of COVID-19?

What are some events, actions, or resources that make your job easier on a daily basis? Harder?

Follow up: If you could have access to anything to support your work, what would you request? How have responses to COVID-19 impacted your work?

Closing

Is there anything else that you would like to share related to what impacts your work? Is there anyone else that's important for me to speak to in order to understand these issues?

Interview 2/ Observation follow-up
The following interview aims to elicit participant narratives regarding classroom experiences.

I'd like to ask you few questions about [class scenario].
How would you describe what happened in this scenario?
What options did you have to react to this scenario?
Why did you choose that option?

Closing
Is there anything else that you would like to share about this scenario?

Interview 3
The goal of this interview is to illuminate how practitioners position themselves and their work in relation to contexts outside of their schools.

Introduction
How have things changed since the beginning of the school year?

Resources and Policy
I want to know a little bit about how you decide what to do during the day.

Are there specific resources that you draw on when conducting your work?
Probe for curricular tools, collaboration with other professionals.

How would you describe the role of policy in shaping your work?
Probe for district-level, state-level, federal level.

What are some other elements or events outside of the school building that shape your work?
Probe for conversations with community members, media messages.

What advice would you give policy makers to help support the education of students with disabilities?

Closing
Is there anything else that you would like to share about your work?

Appendix B: Observation Template and Protocol

Observation protocol

Work with students
In what ways do special education teachers work with students? Through virtual support in general education classes, one-on-one work, small group work, or some other format?

Which teachers, staff, teachers' assistants, students, volunteers, etc. support students with disabilities throughout the virtual or in-person school day?

What are the instructional activities like? What is the teachers'/staff role (facilitator of independent work, direct instruction, etc.)?

If there is work in small groups, how are the groupings determined?

If there are disruptions, how do staff handle them?

Other responsibilities
What kinds of activities do special education teachers do throughout the day when they are not teaching?

Do they have regular meetings with other staff? What do they discuss in these meetings?

How do special education teachers express challenges? Do they request or solicit support from other teachers?

How do special education teachers relate to other teachers when they are facing a challenge?

What kinds of interactions do special education teachers have with administrators?

What kinds of interactions do they have with other school staff, e.g. social workers?

What kinds of interactions do they have with parents or others outside of the school?

Are there any discussions of overall mission or goals as they apply to pedagogy or to particular students?

Appendix C: School Staff Interview Protocol

Note: This protocol is intended as an outline to guide the discussion. When practical, the researcher will pose additional follow-up questions regarding participant work as it relates to special education.

Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me to talk about your experiences as a [job title]. I'm interested in learning about your experiences as a staff member at this school.

How did you become a [job title] at this school?

How would you describe this school to an incoming family?

Details of work

How would you describe your role at this school?

Probe for job responsibilities pre and post-COVID-19.

How is special education programming structured in your school?

Probe for inclusive practices, personnel involved, resources for professional support, pre and post COVID-19.

Could you describe a typical day to me?

Follow up: How did you decide on that schedule/ order of events? How have your days changed in light of COVID-19?

What are some events, actions, or resources that make your job easier on a daily basis? Harder?

Follow up: If you could have access to anything to support your work, what would you request? How have responses to COVID-19 impacted your work?

What advice would you give policy makers to help support the education of students with disabilities?

Closing

Is there anything else that you would like to share related to what impacts your work? Is there anyone else that's important for me to speak to in order to understand these issues?

Appendix D: Administrator Interview Protocol

Note: This protocol is intended as an outline to guide the discussion. When practical, the researcher will pose additional follow-up questions regarding participant work as it relates to special education.

Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me to talk about your experiences as a district/state administrator. I'm interested in learning about your experiences in this role.

How did you become a district/state administrator?

Details of work

How would you describe your role to someone unfamiliar with education?

Probe for job responsibilities pre and post-COVID-19.

Could you describe a typical day to me?

Resources and Policy

Are there specific resources that you draw on when conducting your work?

How would you describe the role of policy in shaping your work?

What are some other elements or events outside of the school building that shape your work?

Probe for conversations with community members, media messages.

What advice would you give policy makers to help support the education of students with disabilities?

Closing

Is there anything else that you would like to share about your work?