The Roles of Teachers in Effective Inclusive Elementary Schools

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Setting the Stage: The Importance of Shared Conceptions of Teachers’ Roles

Challenges defining special and general educators’ roles in inclusive schools date back to the beginning of special education. In 1977, Weatherley and Lipsky traced three MA school districts’ responses to Chapter 766, which was passed in 1972 and formed the legal model for the original version of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Examining how “street-level bureaucrats” (i.e., local educators responsible for bringing the law to life) enacted Chapter 766, they found that, without adequate resources to fulfill the law’s intent fully, educators used their substantial local discretion to make judgments about how to triage their efforts, as a result of which, “a law and its administrative regulations, intended to produce uniform application of procedures, instead yielded wide variations in application” (p. 188). Educators in different contexts conceptualized the law’s purposes in different ways, prioritizing different mandates, and thus took up their roles in enacting Chapter 766 in different ways. Subsequent studies of the implementation of the original Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, 1975, now IDEA 2004) similarly found wide variability in the enactment of the law across contexts (Singer et al., 1986, 1989).

Though special education law has changed dramatically in the last 40 years, the issues Weatherley and Lipsky identified in 1977 remain. Local educators have substantial discretion to interpret and enact the IDEA (2004) and other legal guidance, without adequate resources to enact all provisions as intended, and they hold varied conceptions of the purposes of special education services, resulting in different applications of the law across contexts (e.g., Bray & Russell, 2018; Gomez-Najarro, 2020). Consequently, despite many attempts to define special and general educators’ roles in serving students with disabilities (e.g., Brownell et al., 2010), there is wide variability in how their roles are conceptualized and enacted (Billingsley et al., 2019).
Shared conceptions of special and general educators’ roles are essential to effective inclusive elementary schools for several reasons. First, educational systems depend on coordination among multiple institutions (Sykes et al., 2010). State education agencies, teacher education programs, local education agencies, and individual schools depend on one another to foster a special and general educator workforce that can fulfill meaningful roles in serving students with disabilities (Shepherd et al., 2016; Sykes et al., 2010). For example, state education agencies set licensure standards that incentivize prospective teachers to obtain key skills (Sindelar et al., 2019), while teacher education programs prepare future teachers to fulfill their roles (Leko et al., 2015), local education agencies allocate special educators to schools and provide early-career induction and mentoring that fosters their capacity to fulfill those roles (Billingsley et al., 2009), and schools provide them with schedules, curricula, and other resources needed to fulfill those roles (Billingsley et al., 2019). In short, our educational system requires the coordination of multiple institutions in developing the teacher workforce. This coordination depends on a shared vision of special and general educators’ roles.

Second, inclusive schools fundamentally depend on the coordination of effort among special educators, general educators, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and administrators, as these personnel all share responsibility for the educational experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2010; Prewett et al., 2012). Collectively, these personnel must ensure students with disabilities meaningfully participate in inclusive social and academic experiences, with appropriate supports across environments, and ensure students access interventions addressing individual needs. Thus, they must coordinate the times, content, and methods by which students are taught across environments in the school (e.g., across general education settings, resource settings, and so on; Benedict et al., 2020; McLeskey et al., 2014). Effective coordination requires shared understandings of the roles those personnel play in serving students and supporting one another (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021).

Finally, extant research indicates teachers’ conceptions of their roles may shape what they do (e.g., Feiman-Nemser et al., 2014; Grossman et al., 2001; Morris Mathews, 2020; Urbach et al., 2015). For example, in a mixed-methods study of elementary special educators’ beliefs about their roles, Urbach et al. (2015) found special educators who obtained lower scores on an evaluation of their reading instruction conceptualized the purpose of their roles as providing a supportive, safe haven where students could “get love” (p. 331). In contrast, those who obtained higher scores emphasized providing intensive instruction, maintaining high expectations, and “teach[ing] re-gardless” (p. 331) of other factors affecting their work. Other studies have obtained similar findings, indicating that how people conceptualize the purposes of their roles shapes how they use their discretion to enact that role (Morris Mathews, 2020).

In this chapter, we explore stakeholders’ conceptions of teachers’ roles serving students with disabilities in inclusive elementary schools. We set the stage by defining what we mean by an effective inclusive school and providing a conceptual foundation in role theory. We then discuss how scholars and policy makers have conceptualized teachers’ roles in inclusive schools and what research tells us about teachers’ roles in inclusive schools. Finally, we propose a path forward, discussing avenues for changing individual and collective beliefs about special and general educators’ roles to improve how schools support the inclusion of students with disabilities. Throughout, we contend that, as Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) found, local educators have broad discretion to interpret and enact their roles in special education and that their conceptions of the purposes of their roles shape how they utilize this discretion.

**Effective Inclusive Schools**

We conceptualize inclusive schools as settings in which students with disabilities are active, valued participants in all aspects of the school and have the supports they need to succeed both academically
and socially (McLeskey et al., 2018). We identify with Villa and Thousand’s (2016) contention that “Inclusion is both a vision and a practice” (p. 18), as implementing inclusion effectively requires a commitment to both (a) a vision that all students have a right to belong, learn, and achieve high standards in inclusive settings, and also (b) the daily practices that support that vision (e.g., effective instructional methods, collaboration). Effective inclusive schools systematically promote inclusion and employ practices that support it, eliminating barriers to engagement and learning across all contexts in a school (Li & Ruppar, 2020), so all students, including those with disabilities, interact, learn, and play with a diverse group of peers.

Though inclusive schools privilege meeting student needs in general education classes, we recognize that effective inclusive schools include a continuum of placements (e.g., resource, self-contained) to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. In inclusive schools, restrictive settings should be used only when individual student needs cannot be met in general education settings; these settings should not be a default for any student (e.g., Hoge et al., 2014; Olson et al., 2016), and these settings should be valued and supported, so students make “more than de minimis” progress (Turnbull et al., 2018) toward their goals and toward increasing engagement in general education settings and curricula. Thus, we consider special educators’ roles across a full continuum of settings, not only in general education classes.

**Conceptual Foundation: Role Theory**

Role theory seeks to understand and explain human behavior by considering how a person’s position in a complex social system is associated with the expectations for their behavior (Biddle, 1986). Role theory is derived from a theatrical metaphor, comparing the characteristic behavior patterns (roles) in which people engage, in social systems, to roles in a play. Thus, role theory uses three concepts to understand how people act in social contexts: (a) *Roles*, defined as “patterned and characteristic social behaviors” (p. 68); (b) *Parts*, defined as the identities or positions participants take on; and (c) *Scripts*, defined as expectations for someone in a particular part. Just as an actor’s part in a play comes with particular expectations (defined by the script) for their behavior, one’s position in a social system comes with expectations for what they should do and how they should do it. These expectations can be held by both the individual fulfilling that role and by others interacting with them; moreover, different people may have different expectations for the same role (Biddle, 1986). For example, a special educator might take on a role in academic instruction (e.g., teaching foundational skills needed to engage with the general education curriculum) as a function of their *part* or social position (i.e., special educator), which entails particular *scripts* or expectations for their behavior (e.g., planning instruction, using particular instructional materials); and, they and their colleagues may have different expectations for that role—different scripts to which they expect the special educator to adhere (e.g., Antia, 1999; Damore & Murray, 2009). Often, *roles* are defined by their function—the purpose they fulfill in the social system (Biddle, 1986). For example, the special educator in the preceding example could conceptualize the purpose of their role in instruction as teaching foundational skills, or they could conceptualize the purpose as providing accommodations to support learning general education curriculum, or they could have another purpose in mind (e.g., building self-esteem, supporting general educators’ efforts).

Role theory has been used in a variety of scholarly traditions, which conceptualize key dimensions of role theory in different ways (Biddle, 1986). For example, they vary in the extent to which they conceptualize individuals as agentically shaping and taking on roles versus the extent to which they conceptualize roles as constrained by social systems (Biddle, 1986). However, they share an assumption that individuals operate from a specific position in complex social systems, and their position comes with particular expectations, both internally held and externally imposed, that can be used to understand patterns in their behavior. In addition, role theory is consistently invested in both
(a) individual’s conceptions and enactment of their role, (b) broader organizational conceptions of role and structures for supporting and communicating roles, and (c) interactions between the individual and the organization (Biddle, 1986).

The work of teaching is fundamentally social in nature, based on networks of social interactions between and among teachers, students, administrators, parents, and other personnel (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Youngs et al., 2012); as such, role theory may offer useful conceptual tools for understanding how teachers engage in and experience their work, especially in inclusive schools, where greater coordination of teachers’ work may require shared understandings of teachers’ roles (e.g., Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; McLeskey et al., 2014). In special education, role theory has primarily been used to explore parents’ roles in the IEP process (e.g., Hirano & Rowe, 2015); few studies have formally used role theory as a foundation for examining special or general educator’s roles (Bettini, Wang et al., 2019 is an exception). However, many studies have sought to understand the roles special and general educators play, exploring their own (e.g., Urbach et al., 2015) and others’ (e.g., Ruppar et al., 2017) expectations for their role and the characteristic patterns of behavior that they actually take up (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2012).

What Do We Know from Research and the Wisdom of Practice?

We first examine what policy and scholarship suggest teachers’ roles should be. We then consider research on the roles teachers actually take up in the service of students with disabilities.

Conceptions of Role within Policy and Scholarly Guidance

The IDEA (2004) specifies what special education must do for students with disabilities, while the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) specifies what education must do for all students, including those with disabilities. In some respects, their guidance sets clear parameters around educators’ work; for example, The IDEA (2004) requires educators to hold yearly meetings to revise students’ Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), as well triennial multidisciplinary evaluation team meetings, working in collaboration with parents, related service providers, and other stakeholders (IDEA 2004); thus, educators must schedule, plan for, and attend these meetings, and demonstrate attempts to engage parents in the process. However, as Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) found, the educators who enact these requirements hold varying conceptions of the purposes of these processes, as well as substantial discretion to determine who does what, when, where, and how; thus, legal provisions may be enacted very differently across contexts.

Moreover, legal guidance includes some potential conflicts that educators must navigate as they choose how to enact their roles in serving students with disabilities, particularly regarding the purposes of their work (McLaughlin, 2010). Policy consistently promotes the long-term aims of minimizing achievement gaps between students with and without disabilities and maximizing students’ college/career readiness. However, policy is less consistent regarding the purposes and methods of teachers’ daily instruction for students with disabilities (McLaughlin, 2010). Since 1975, IDEA has consistently emphasized that individualization of instructional methods and goals is at the heart of special education services (Yell et al., 2017). Over the past 20–25 years, policy has also consistently mandated that all students with disabilities access the general education curriculum (Yell et al., 2017). This guidance has been codified in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2002), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and IDEA (1997, 2004; McLaughlin, 2010; Yell & Shriner, 1997; Yell et al., 2017). Consequently, for a generation, special educators have also been consistently expected to play a role in supporting students’ learning of general education standards (Brownell et al., 2010). This imperative is in tension with IDEA’s emphasis on addressing individual learning needs (McLaughlin, 2010). As McLaughlin (2010) notes, there is “a fundamental tension between the
prevailing K-12 educational policy of universal standards, assessments, and accountability as defined through Title 1 and the entitlement to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) within IDEA” (p. 265), as “students with disabilities may be treated unjustly in being held to universal standards” (p. 266). This tension can create inadvertent ambiguity regarding the instructional aims teachers’ roles should be designed to prioritize for students with disabilities—the purposes toward which they should orient their work (Billingsley et al., 2019; Sayeski et al., 2019). Should educators prioritize individualized instruction in the areas where students struggle, or should they prioritize students’ access to and success in general education curricula? Though both are legally mandated and important, and though they may sometimes be meaningfully combined (e.g., Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011), time constraints may limit educators’ capacity to fulfill both imperatives, requiring them to set priorities (Sayeski et al., 2019).

Exacerbating this tension, these policies have different accountability mechanisms (Brownell et al., 2010). NCLB and ESSA hold entire systems accountable for students’ learning of general education standards through sub-group disaggregation on high stakes tests (Brownell et al., 2010; Shepherd et al., 2016). In contrast, accountability in IDEA emphasizes progress toward individual goals on students’ IEPs (Brownell et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 2010). Further, whereas accountability for meeting ESSA’s mandates is distributed across an entire system and is enforced by the state (creating a widespread investment, among all personnel in a school, to meet those mandates), accountability in IDEA is intended to be enforced by individual students’ caregivers on their behalf, in private interactions between caregivers and schools, thus limiting accountability of the entire system for adherence to the law’s provisions and intent, and limiting the potential for this accountability to yield systemic change (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Skrtic, 2012). Importantly, special educators are expected to meet both sets of imperatives—supporting students’ progress on general education curricula while also ensuring progress on individualized goals—whereas general educators are primarily held accountable for the learning of general education curricula (McLaughlin, 2010).

Further, scholars also disagree about what should be educators’ core priorities for students with disabilities. Scholars generally agree on the importance of eliminating disparities in educational outcomes between students with and without disabilities and that special and general educators both have a role to play in eliminating these disparities. However, scholars debate the extent to which teachers should prioritize intensive intervention in foundational skills (Fuchs et al., 2010; Sayeski et al., 2019) versus prioritizing access to general education curricula (e.g., Kurth et al., 2020; McLaughlin, 2010). For example, some scholars have expressed deep concern that emphasis on general education access and instruction constitutes “blurring” of special and general education (Fuchs et al., 2010, p. 306), warning of a danger that “special education vanishes in all but name […] inadvertently weakening the capacity of schools to provide most intensive services to our nation’s most instructionally needy children” (p. 309). In contrast, others view inclusion in general education curricula as vital to ensuring equity and raising expectations (McLaughlin, 2010), critiquing the role of special education in replicating low expectations for students with disabilities through an emphasis on individual goals (e.g., Agran et al., 2020; Olson et al., 2016; Siuty, 2019). While scholars have extensively debated these issues, neither those advocating for prioritizing intensive intervention nor those advocating for prioritizing general education curricula have provided a clear answer to the logistical question of how educators should reconcile these competing instructional purposes within the constraints of a 6-hour school day and a 9-month school year.

Response to Intervention (RtI), promoted by IDEA (2004) and adopted by the majority of elementary schools in the U.S. (Bradley et al., 2011), has been proposed as a systematic way to address the needs of all students, while maintaining a focus on standardized core instruction (Brownell et al., 2010; Hoover & Patton, 2008). Often referred to as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), which also incorporates positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), RtI provides a structure for situating both general education instruction (i.e., tier 1) and specialized intensive intervention in
foundational skills (i.e., tier 3) in the same structure (Hoover & Patton, 2008; Simonsen et al., 2010). Though some have proposed that RtI could resolve debates about special and general educators’ roles in serving students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2010), others have highlighted how differing conceptions of RtI are subject to the same debates (Fuchs et al., 2010), and further, reiterated that the time for addressing foundational skills must come from somewhere, necessitating that students receive intensive intervention at the expense of doing something else in the school day (Sayeski et al., 2019).

These scholarly debates about what instructional content educators should prioritize for students with disabilities reflect core differences about the purpose of special education, and thus they are unlikely to be easily resolved (Billingsley et al., 2019). Moreover, these debates echo similar conversations about where and how educators should be teaching students with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2019), and they are deeply intertwined with differing conceptions of disability (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Baglieri et al., 2011; Fuchs et al., 2010). Thus, the answer to the core question (i.e., What should be special and general educators’ roles in inclusive schools?) remains deeply contested, both in policy guiding special education and among the scholars responsible for preparing special and general educators.

**Special and General Educators’ Roles in Effective Inclusive Schools**

Educators cannot wait for these debates to be resolved. Every day, they must make immediate, consequential decisions about the core purposes they should be fulfilling in teaching students with disabilities and how to organize their work to fulfill these purposes effectively given the particular resources and constraints of their school. In the following sections, we discuss extant research regarding the roles educators fulfill in schools. Note that few studies have explicitly sought to examine teachers’ roles in inclusive elementary schools. Rather, most studies examined teachers’ roles in RtI (e.g., Gomez-Najarro, 2020) or in schools in general (e.g., Youngs et al., 2011); we discuss studies regardless of the schools on which they focus, but draw particular attention to studies focused on inclusive schools (e.g., Olson et al., 2016).

Special educators’ roles in schools are complex, multidimensional, and often less clearly defined than general educators’ roles (Billingsley et al., 2019; Youngs et al., 2011). In an observational study of 36 special educators’ time, Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010) described a wide range of activities special educators engaged in, with no single activity taking precedence and non-instructional responsibilities consuming more than half their time; subsequent studies have obtained similar findings (Bettini et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012; Vannest et al., 2010).

General educators’ roles are generally more clearly defined than special educators’, as they often experience more explicit guidance regarding what to teach, when, how, and to whom (Billingsley et al., 2019; Youngs et al., 2011). However, their roles in serving students with disabilities may be ambiguous, with unclear and sometimes conflicting expectations regarding, for example, the aspects of instruction for which they are primarily responsible and how they should contribute to IEP meetings (Bray & Russell, 2018; Fennick & Liddy, 2001).

For the purposes of this chapter, we describe three roles for which teachers are responsible. Specifically, special and general educators both take on roles as (a) instructors, planning and providing instruction; and (b) collaborators, coordinating efforts with other educators; and, special educators also take on roles as (c) IEP case managers, completing paperwork, working with families, and ensuring legal compliance with IDEA (2004).

These roles are not mutually exclusive, but rather tightly intertwined with one another; for example, collaboration (collaborator role) is often focused on designing and providing instruction (instructor role) or determining what should be in a student’s IEP (case management role; Mitchell et al., 2012). As a participant in Ruppar et al.’s (2017) study noted, a special educator’s role “switches and morphs depending on the minute” (p. 126). Further, these roles are not comprehensive of all that
special and general educators do, as they have other responsibilities beyond these roles (e.g., supervising students during non-instructional time; Vannest et al., 2010). Note also that these roles are relevant regardless of the service delivery model in which students are served. Though special educators’ job titles (i.e., their parts, from role theory) are often defined by their service delivery model (e.g., co-teacher, resource teacher), their roles (i.e., characteristic behavior patterns in service of a purpose) are consistent across instructional settings and have some common expectations (i.e., scripts, from role theory). In other words, whether students are in co-taught, resource, or self-contained settings, instructor, collaborator, and IEP case manager are roles that special and general educators take up in serving them. Using extant research, we first describe what we know about the dimensions of these roles, followed by individual and contextual factors shaping how they conceptualize and enact their roles, as well as the consequences of these roles for burnout, attrition, and instruction.

Instructors

Special Educators

Consistent with how policymakers and scholars conceptualize the work of special education (ESSA, 2015; IDEA 2004), studies of special educators’ perspectives underscore that providing academic and behavioral instruction is central to their role (e.g., Jones & Youngs, 2012; Morris Mathews, 2020). As such, one would assume the majority of special educators’ days would be comprised of providing instruction. Yet, extant studies indicate otherwise, with estimates ranging from 16% to 46% of their time allocated to providing academic instruction (Mitchell et al., 2012; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010).

However, special educators’ time is allocated to many tasks that contribute to instruction (Mitchell et al., 2012). First, special educators gather information about their students to inform their instructional decisions; this may include observing students, reviewing records, collecting data on student progress, or administering standardized measures of academic performance (Bishop et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2012; Urbach et al., 2015; Youngs et al., 2011). Second, special educators draw on that information to make decisions about instruction. This includes designing long- and short-term instructional plans; locating, selecting, adapting, and modifying curricula (Bishop et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2012; Youngs et al., 2011); and planning instruction to meet student needs (Ruppar et al., 2017; Siuty et al., 2018). Finally, special educators provide instruction, delivering targeted interventions to small groups of students (Mitchell et al., 2012), instructing in co-taught settings (Friend & Cook, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2012), and pushing in to general education classes (Zagona et al., 2020).

General Educators

General educators’ roles in instruction are shaped by their expertise in content and their access to curricular materials (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Brownell et al., 2010; Olson et al., 2016). As core content teachers, general educators are responsible for designing and delivering instruction for all students in core curricula (i.e., as defined by state standards), using methods accessible and meaningful to all students (Brownell et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 2010; Soukup et al., 2007). This requires general educators to enact accommodations and modifications that make instruction accessible to students with disabilities (Finnerty et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2016). In some inclusive schools, general educators are responsible for developing accommodations and modifications (Olson et al., 2016). For example, in a case study of how a highly effective, inclusive middle school fostered curricular inclusion of students with severe disabilities, Olson et al. (2016) found general educators’ roles
included proactively designing instruction that was accessible for students with disabilities and adjusting their instruction, in the moment, to meet student needs. In other schools, special educators may be responsible for designing accommodations and modifications (Mitchell et al., 2012), or special and general educators may collaborate to design them (Finnerty et al., 2019). Regardless of who designs them, general educators are responsible for enacting accommodations and modifications to ensure students access the core curriculum (e.g., Finnerty et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2016). And, because special and general educators’ roles are overlapping and interdependent, fulfilling this role requires collaboration.

Collaborators

In inclusive schools, educators’ work is interdependent, as multiple educators play unique but complementary roles in serving students with disabilities, and they depend on one another to fulfill their respective roles (Klingner & Vaughn, 2002). Thus, they must collaborate with one another to ensure their work is well-coordinated and mutually reinforces shared goals (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Pratt, 2014). Klingner and Vaughn (2002) highlighted how interdependence represents a change from the past. Over 7 years, they examined how a special educator’s role changed as her school gradually became more inclusive. Previously, Joyce, the special educator, checked in with general educators weekly; she said, “I would go before school once a week and say, ‘What are you teaching this week?’… and that was about it,” because the general educator “had her own agenda… and I had my own” (p. 27). In contrast, when Joyce began providing services in students’ classes, collaboration became much more intensive, including such tasks as going over students’ goals, interpreting student progress, and setting up instructional objectives and structures that were inclusive and respectful of students with disabilities. More recently, Bettini, Lillis et al. (2021) examined special educators’ roles in contexts where students with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) were moving from self-contained to inclusive placements. Whereas prior studies of special educators’ roles in serving students with EBD highlighted their isolation (O’Brien et al., 2019), Bettini, Lillis et al. (2021) found that, because of students’ inclusion, special educators’ efforts to meet student needs were interdependent with general educators, paraprofessionals, and administrators. Participants emphasized that effective services depended on all educators coordinating their efforts to meet student needs across contexts.

Special Educators

Special educators report spending substantial portions of their time (8–27%) interacting with other educators (Bettini et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010), and they describe collaboration as a core role in inclusive settings (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Klingner & Vaughn, 2002; Olson et al., 2016; Ruppar et al., 2017). Whereas special educators in separate settings could choose to shut their doors and autonomously provide services independent of other teachers, in inclusive schools, special educators are just one of many educators responsible for serving students with disabilities (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021).

Special educators collaborate with many other personnel, including general educators, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and administrators (Cole-Lade & Bailey, 2020; Olson et al., 2016). Often, special educators hold primary responsibility for coordinating other educators’ work, ensuring all team members understand what they should be doing, why, when, and how (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Pratt, 2014). This is particularly true regarding paraprofessionals, who special educators often train and support (e.g., Brock et al., 2020; French, 2001; Giangreco et al., 2010). However, general educators also report depending on special educators to help them learn about student needs and instructional strategies to meet those needs (e.g., Zagona et al., 2017, 2020), and
special educators support general educators to understand how to serve students with disabilities (e.g., Klingner & Vaughn, 2002). Special educators describe their collaborative work with other educators as including a range of tasks, such as discussing lesson plans, collaboratively developing accommodations and modifications, and coordinating schedules to ensure students have support and services when/where needed (Antia, 1999; Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Klingner & Vaughn, 2002).

Though these actions may have a short-term aim, special educators also highlight how they often use collaboration as a way to build shared understandings among educators about students’ needs and inclusion (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Li & Ruppar, 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Zagona et al., 2017). Special educators often emphasize that shared understandings of the purposes of their work—and a shared commitment to students’ inclusion, effective instruction, and success—are essential to effectively coordinating and collaborating with others (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Pratt, 2014; Zagona et al., 2020), though they often report that these conditions are not present (e.g., Fowler et al., 2019). For example, in Pratt’s (2014) qualitative study of how co-teachers’ relationships evolved over time, teachers emphasized the crucial importance of shared conceptions of their purpose, saying that having “the same goal in mind” (p. 5) was the foundation for symbiotic coordination of effort. Similarly, in Bettini, Lillis et al.’s (2021) study, special educators described depending on other personnel to share their understanding of students’ needs and the division of responsibilities for meeting those needs. When they felt they had shared understandings, they felt supported to meet student needs; when they felt others did not share their understandings, this challenged their efforts to serve students effectively.

Because shared understandings are not always present, special educators often describe using collaborative interactions to develop shared understandings (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Li & Ruppar, 2020; Miller et al., 2020). For example, in Bettini, Lillis et al.’s (2021) study, a special educator explained how a general educator did not share the IEP team’s belief that a student needed to receive instruction in a separate setting during significant behavioral incidents, and thus did not provide the special educator with instructional materials he had missed; this resulted in the student missing substantial general education content. Because shared understandings were essential to effective collaboration, special educators described using many strategies to build shared understandings, including (a) providing professional development about student needs; (b) collecting and sharing data on student needs and current resource limitations; (c) repeatedly reiterating student needs, despite opposition; and (d) making strategic choices about who to work with (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021). Similarly, a special educator in Ruppar et al.’s (2015) study described joining a district literacy committee so she could influence decisions that were consequential for her students’ literacy instruction, while a special educator in Gomez-Najarro’s (2020) study described seeking out informal collaboration with general educators so she could influence decisions about students who they were potentially going to be serving in future. These studies suggest collaboration is not only aimed at directly serving students but is often a means through which special educators try to foster contexts more inclusive of their students.

**General Educators**

General educators consistently note that collaboration with specialists is important for improving their capacity to teach students with disabilities effectively (e.g., Finnerty et al., 2019; Giangreco et al., 1993). Studies of effective inclusive schools indicate that general and special educators often collaborate in developing accommodations and modifications for students, with the general educator contributing expertise in content and curricula, while the special educator contributes expertise in student learning needs and instructional strategies (Finnerty et al., 2019). General educators report highly valuing the expertise special educators bring to serving students with disabilities and looking to special educators for guidance regarding how to more effectively teach their students (Finnerty...
et al., 2019; Giangreco et al., 1993; Zagona et al., 2020). For example, in Zagona et al.’s (2020) mixed methods investigation of how general educators fostered the participation of students with complex support needs in the general education curriculum, general educators reported relying on guidance from special educators regarding how to meaningfully include students.

**IEP Case Managers**

Both special and general educators fulfill instructional and collaborative roles for students with disabilities; in contrast, IEP case management tends to primarily fall to special educators (e.g., Antia, 1999; Bray & Russell, 2018; Fennick & Liddy, 2001). Few studies have examined special educators’ roles as IEP case managers, and we know less about variability in the ways special educators conceptualize and enact this role than we do about collaborative and instructional roles (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). However, several studies indicate special educators engage in many tasks focused on managing caseloads, including developing IEPs, attending IEP meetings, assessing students’ progress toward goals, helping to evaluate students, and more (Bray & Russell, 2016; 2018; Mitchell et al., 2012; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010).

Special educators’ case management role often takes up significant portions of their time (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). In a study of 36 special educators’ time use, Vannest and Hagan-Burke reported paperwork accounted for an average of 12.1% of special educators’ time; IEPs accounted for an additional 3% and assessments 4.4%. Mitchell et al. (2012) similarly found that paperwork accounted for about 17% of special educators’ time, almost one day/week. Special educators often report paperwork is a stressor that creates a discrepancy between what they believe they should be doing (i.e., instruction) and how they are actually spending their time (i.e., paperwork; e.g., Albrecht et al., 2009; Billingsley, 2007; Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

Ideally, IEPs caseload management would be instructionally meaningful, providing substantive guidance to support educators in providing effective services (Bray & Russell, 2016; 2018; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). Yet, caseload management is often viewed as an exercise in procedural compliance, rather than a meaningful act of planning for and providing learning opportunities; as such, IEPs may provide limited assistance to special educators regarding the specific supports and services they should provide to students in inclusive settings (Bray & Russell, 2016, 2018; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011; Russell & Bray, 2013). In their ethnographic examination of IEPs in two inclusive secondary schools, Bray and Russell (2018) noted that only one of the 12 IEPs they examined included “any instructional strategies or interventions, assistive technology, and/or related services to attend to the unique learning needs of students” (p. 254). Instead, IEPs instantiated general education standards-based curriculum and methods with limited accommodations, modifications, or direct services. Caseload management responsibilities were oriented toward “monitor[ing] failure” (p. 255) to ensure students did not fail a class, as course failure could open the school up to liability for failing to meet students’ needs. Bray and Russell (2018) further noted that, though IEPs played a limited role in guiding teaching and learning, writing IEPs and convening IEP meetings still took up substantial time.

Other studies have obtained similar findings. Bray and Russell (2016) conducted a qualitative comparative case study of forces structuring IEP team processes for five secondary students with learning disabilities. They found that the IEP acted as a “script” from which IEP teams seldom deviated; though IEP meetings are intended as a forum for generative collaboration, they found these meetings were primarily focused on the special educator mechanically going over what was written in the IEP (Bray & Russell, 2016). Ruppar and Gaffney (2011) obtained similar findings in their instrumental case study of the eligibility determination meetings for an elementary student. The meeting was a site for formalizing decisions that had been made previously and not a site for meaningful collaborative discussion of the student’s data, goals, and services (Ruppar & Gaffney,
Further, in an analysis of states’ evaluation policies, Gilmour and Wehby (2020) noted that, in many states, special educators’ evaluation systems attend to procedural aspects of IEP case management (e.g., timeliness of paperwork), but not more substantive aspects of this role, suggesting institutional pressures may orient educators toward the procedural rather than educational aspects of IEP case management. Because IEP case management roles may often be conceptualized in terms of procedural compliance (e.g., Bray & Russell, 2016, 2018), time spent on this role may feel, to special educators, like a distraction from instructional and collaborative roles that feel more meaningful (Billingsley, 2007; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Kaff, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2012).

Special educators’ roles in managing caseloads may be challenging in other ways as well. Echoing scholarly debates and core tensions embedded within the IDEA (2004) and Title 1 (Fuchs et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 2010), special educators report a conflict between the procedural requirements of IDEA and NCLB as they relate to IEP goals (Russell & Bray, 2013). Ahearn (2006) reported many states were moving toward standards-based IEPs, using the state’s grade level content standards to determine students’ IEP goals. For some special educators, this pressure to align IEP goals to state standards may conflict with IDEA’s focus on individualized service delivery (Ahearn, 2006; Russell & Bray, 2013). Russell and Bray (2013) reported that special educators felt pressured to align to standards in ways that conflicted with their professional judgment regarding priorities for their students. In other words, the IEP document and process may be a site in which conflicting conceptions of the instructional purposes of special education (Fuchs et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 2010) are brought to the fore.

Finally, while SETs often serve as facilitators of IEP meetings, they may not be adequately prepared for this role (Beck & DeSutter 2020). Special educators experience many challenges in facilitating IEP meetings, such as low attendance, poor preparation from other team members, and disagreements between school personnel and family members. Overseeing these diverse teams can be complex, requiring sophisticated skills (e.g., Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Rossetti et al., 2017). For example, many special educators struggle to meaningfully involve parents; doing so effectively may require better supporting special educators to run culturally and linguistically responsive IEP meetings, as well as better supporting families to navigate these processes (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). Yet, special educators report not having learning opportunities that help them develop these skills (Beck & DeSutter 2020).

Factors Shaping Educators’ Conceptions and Enactment of Their Roles

Teachers have broad discretion to enact their roles in a range of different ways, depending on how they conceptualize the purpose of the role; the same actions (e.g., modifying curriculum) could be enacted for different purposes (see, for example, Morris Mathews, 2020; Ruppar et al., 2018; Urbach et al., 2015). For example, in a mixed-methods study of how working conditions shaped special educators’ reading instruction for students with EBD in self-contained settings, Morris Mathews et al. (2021) found one special educator and her colleagues conceptualized her instructional role as “flip[ping] a switch” (p. 28) to support general education content when students’ behavior prevented them from attending general education classes; thus, her instruction was unscheduled and unproductive, consisting primarily of prompting students to complete work that other students completed in general education. In contrast, other special educators also supported students’ access to general education content when behavior prevented them from attending general education classes, but they still viewed themselves as having substantive responsibility for planning and providing instruction in areas where students struggled; thus, they enacted their instructional role in quite different ways. Because educators may conceptualize and enact their roles in quite different ways, it is important to understand what factors may shape how they conceptualize and
enact their roles. We thus explore individual (e.g., beliefs) and contextual (e.g., administrators) factors that research suggests may shape how teachers conceptualize and enact their roles.

Individual Factors

Few studies have explored individual factors shaping how teachers conceptualize and enact their roles in serving students with disabilities, but a handful of studies suggest beliefs and knowledge may contribute (Brownell et al., 2014; Kiely et al., 2014).

Beliefs

Extant research indicates several key beliefs may shape how special and general educators take up their roles in serving students with disabilities. First, teachers’ expectations for students seem to be crucial (Kiely et al., 2014).

Second, extant research consistently indicates the importance of general educators taking ownership for students with disabilities, viewing instructing students with disabilities as primarily their responsibility (Giangreco et al., 1993). In a foundational study of general educators’ experiences including students with severe disabilities in their classes, Giangreco et al. (1993) documented how teachers initially were willing to “host” (p. 7) students with disabilities, yet minimized their role in students’ learning. One teacher said, “I don’t think of him as one of the children that I educate;” another shared, “The aide will be more or less responsible for seeing to his needs” (p. 367). For most teachers, this changed over the year as they slowly came to recognize their responsibility to the student. At the end of the year, one teacher shared:

I had always said, “I have 13 students plus Jon,” and then I realized: Why am I saying “plus Jon”? He’s one of my students […] I’m the one that got the education, for the certificate for teaching. I’m responsible for every other student. I should be responsible for this student too […] He’s in my class. That’s my responsibility (p. 368).

In highly effective, inclusive schools, general educators report feeling ownership for the learning of students with disabilities (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014; Olson et al., 2016), as this teacher expressed at the end of the year (Giangreco et al., 1993). Further, in these contexts, special educators are more likely to report feeling able to manage their workloads and planning to stay in their jobs (Bettini, Jones et al., 2017; Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2013), suggesting general educators’ sense of ownership for the learning of students with disabilities may facilitate special educators’ efforts to fulfill their roles.

Teacher Knowledge and Expertise

Evidence from a handful of studies suggests that expertise, which incorporates multiple types of knowledge, may play a role in how special educators understand the needs of students with disabilities and, consequently, how they conceptualize and enact their roles (e.g., Ruppar et al., 2017; Stough & Palmer, 2003; Urbach et al., 2015). Teachers’ expertise incorporates a command of pedagogical content knowledge (as defined by Shulman, 1987) but, importantly in special education, also incorporates a deep knowledge of students’ individual learning characteristics, abilities, and histories (Brownell et al., 2010; Lauterbach et al., 2020; Ruppar et al., 2017). Ruppar et al. (2017) highlighted the crucial role of expertise for special educators’ conceptions and enactment of their roles in an analysis of interview data from 11 expert special educators teaching students with severe disabilities. They found that, in their instructional roles, expert special educators drew on deep, tacit knowledge of systematic instruction, observation and data collection processes, and individual student needs to design and adapt curricula that were age-appropriate and maintained high expectations. Further, extensive knowledge of their context
supported them to collaborate effectively with others to provide learning opportunities that would promote independence and inclusion; they drew on deep situated knowledge of the collaborative and communicative processes in their context to recruit support from others (e.g., paraprofessionals, general educators, families) for students. We previously noted that special educators’ collaborative role is not only about fulfilling direct service responsibilities to students but also about improving their school’s capacity to meaningfully include students with disabilities; Rupp et al.’s (2017) findings suggest deep expertise in the school context is necessary to engage in one’s collaborative role in this way. Other studies have obtained findings consistent with these, indicating special educators’ enactment of their instructional and collaborative roles may be shaped by both (a) their expertise in student learning needs, as well as (b) their expertise in their context (Lauterbach et al., 2020; Stough & Palmer, 2003).

Importantly, these studies find expert teachers’ deep knowledge supports them to hold high expectations, such that they conceptualize and enact their instructional and collaborative roles in ways that foster more rigorous and inclusive educational opportunities for students. For example, in Lauterbach et al.’s (2020) study of expert secondary content area teachers of students with learning disabilities, experts’ knowledge of the demands of college courses, combined with knowledge of students’ learning needs and capacities, led them to design learning opportunities that scaffolded students’ development of routines useful for success in college.

**Contextual Influences on Roles**

Extant studies suggest service delivery models (Embich, 2001), working conditions (Bettini, Wang et al., 2019), and school poverty (Voltz & Fore, 2006) may contribute to how teachers conceptualize and enact their roles.

**Service Delivery Model**

Special educators’ formal titles (i.e., their *parts*, in role theory) are often defined by students’ service delivery model—by the places (e.g., general education classroom, resource, self-contained) in which their students receive services (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Gilmour et al., 2021). Definitions of service delivery models vary greatly, but these models include (a) co-teaching, when a special and general educator share responsibility for planning and delivering instruction to a single class (e.g., Weiss & Lloyd, 2002); (b) consultant or inclusion specialist, when a special educator consults with general educators to support accommodations and modifications in general education classes and provides services in that setting (e.g., Zagona et al., 2020); (c) resource teacher, when a special educator pulls students out of general education to provide services in another space (e.g., Siuty et al., 2018); and (d) self-contained teacher, when a special educator provides most or all instruction in a separate, special education setting (e.g., Bettini, Wang et al., 2019; O’Brien et al., 2019).

All special educators must act as *instructors*, *collaborators*, and *case managers*, but these roles may be enacted differently depending on where students are primarily taught. In their study of special educators’ time use, Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010) found special educators’ time was distributed differently in different service delivery models. Special educators in resource models spent more time directly providing academic instruction compared to special educators in other service delivery models, while those who cotaught spent more time on instruction. This contrasted with (e.g., “providing support to students, with minimal or no direct teaching, during […] instruction”; p. 141) than other special educators, and those in self-contained settings spent more time on discipline and supervising non-instructional activities than other special educators. These results should be taken with caution as the sample was small (*N*=36), and they did not test whether the differences were statistically significant. However, results align with other studies, which indicate special educators may enact these roles in different ways in different service delivery models (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Bettini, Wang et al., 2019; Scruggs et al., 2007).
Special educators in co-taught and consultative models often describe the crucial importance of their collaborative roles, as they must work with general educators to co-plan and co-deliver instruction (e.g., Pratt, 2014; Scruggs et al., 2007; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Importantly, as the proportion of students with disabilities included in general education classes has increased (Williamson et al., 2019), schools’ reliance on coteaching also seems to be increasing; whereas 9% of special educators reported co-teaching in 2000, 17% reported co-teaching in 2012, and 13% reported co-teaching in 2016 (Gilmour et al., 2021). However, extant research indicates special educators often struggle to fulfill meaningful instructional roles in co-taught classes (e.g., Wexler et al., 2018). In a synthesis of research on co-teaching, Scruggs et al. (2007) found special educators were often subordinate to general educators during instruction. They struggled to meaningfully contribute to planning and often spent class time assisting students to complete tasks rather than teaching skills and strategies to support student learning. Findings held across both secondary and elementary settings, but they were more pronounced in secondary (Scruggs et al., 2007). Consistent with this, Jones and Winters (2020) analyzed Massachusetts state data to determine the effects of increasing coteaching on student outcomes. In elementary schools, they found marginal positive effects in math and significant positive effects in English language arts; in secondary schools, they found significant negative effects in both math and English language arts. Thus, in elementary schools, extant evidence indicates special education co-teachers may be able to fulfill productive instructional roles (Jones & Winters, 2020; Scruggs et al., 2007) and that their collaborative roles may be intensified, as they must collaborate to ensure meaningful instructional roles (Klingner & Vaughn, 2002; Scruggs et al., 2007).

In contrast to co-teachers, special educators in self-contained settings report often being relatively isolated, with little to no collaboration except with paraprofessionals (Bettini, Wang et al., 2019; O’Brien et al., 2019). Because these special educators often collaborate primarily with paraprofessionals, their collaborative role may take a different form, requiring more supervisory and training responsibilities and less instructional collaboration than special educators in co-taught settings (Bettini, Cumming et al., 2017; O’Brien et al., 2019). In addition, because they often teach multiple subjects to multiple grades, these special educators may have more intensive instructional responsibilities. For example, in a national survey of special educators serving students with emotional/behavioral disorders in self-contained settings, O’Brien et al. (2019) found special educators averaged more than nine different preparations per week—far more than a typical general educator, who may prepare lessons for four to five different subjects/grades. In Bishop et al.’s (2010) study of novice elementary special educators, a participant in a self-contained class reported having four math groups, five reading groups, and two science groups, which she referred to as a “logistical nightmare” (p. 86). Further, these special educators often report having limited planning time, which they report limits the quality of their instruction (Bettini, Wang et al., 2019; Cumming et al., 2020; Morris Mathews et al., 2020).

Special educators in resource and consultative service delivery models seem to enact their roles in widely varied ways, depending on the distribution of responsibilities among personnel in their school (e.g., Bishop et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2012). For example, Mitchell et al. (2012) used mixed methods to examine how seven special educators in resource settings used their time in elementary schools implementing RtI. One special educator spent more than half of their time on IEP case management, while another spent only 15% of their time on this role. Similarly, two teachers spent no time acting as a diagnostician (i.e., evaluating students’ skills, progress) because these tasks were assigned to the school psychologist in their school; in contrast, another special educator devoted more than half their time to this role. Though co-taught and self-contained service delivery models may also be enacted in varied ways (e.g., Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Morris Mathews et al., 2020), resource and consultative models seem to be especially variable in how they are defined across settings and thus especially varied in their implications for the nature of special educators’ roles (Bishop et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2012).
**Working Conditions**

School working conditions—the demands placed on teachers and the resources to meet those demands—may shape how teachers understand and enact their roles (Billingsley et al., 2019; Mathews et al., 2017; Morris Mathews et al., 2020). In Bettini, Lillis et al.’s (2021) qualitative study of special educators serving students with EBD in self-contained settings, special educators described how others often did not share their conceptions of their instructional roles, creating barriers to fulfilling those roles effectively. For example, one participant had no reading curricula because administrators expected her to obtain lesson plans from general educators, but she had no dedicated time to gather those plans; further, she had students who she felt needed foundational skills instruction (e.g., in decoding), but she did not have dedicated time, resources, or collaborative relationships aligned with this need. Thus, she described often fulfilling her instructional role in ad-hoc ways. As this example highlights, several working conditions may shape educators’ roles in serving students with disabilities, including administrators, material resources, and time (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Billingsley et al., 2019); in addition, evaluation systems may also contribute (Braun & Youngs, 2020).

**Administrators**

Because they organize the school’s routines and foster the school’s culture, administrators may be especially important for shaping educators’ roles in inclusive schools (e.g., McLeskey et al., 2014). Administrators who foster a school culture in which all teachers share responsibility for instructing students with disabilities and who align school schedules and resources with that culture may better support teachers to play meaningful roles in serving students with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2017, 2019; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014). For example, case studies of effective inclusive schools consistently highlight how administrators in these schools establish clear and high instructional expectations for students with disabilities, orienting the school’s schedule and routines to protect students’ access to both general education curricula and foundational skills instruction with specialists—and thereby provide crucial supports for teachers’ roles in serving students with disabilities (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014).

In some contexts, key stakeholders, such as administrators, may hold ill-defined conceptions of special educators’ roles (e.g., Bays & Crockett, 2007; Garwood et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2017). For example, some administrators in Bays and Crockett’s (2007) study expressed that instruction for students with disabilities is “best left to special educators” (p. 154) and hence did not articulate clear visions of special educators’ roles. In such contexts, special educators may expend a considerable time and energy determining and negotiating a meaningful instructional role (Garwood et al., 2018; Mathews, 2018; Youngs et al., 2011), while general educators may hold only ambiguous conceptions of how they should be serving students with disabilities in their classes (Able et al., 2015). In a case study comparing the experiences of novice general and special educators, Youngs et al. (2011) found that novice special educators had to navigate considerable uncertainty about very basic aspects of their instructional roles, such as when, where, and what to teach to whom. Their roles were not clearly defined explicitly (e.g., in communication from administrators) or implicitly (e.g., through schedules and curricula delimiting what they should do when, where, and with whom).

Extant research suggests administrators often have limited knowledge of special education, which could constrain their understanding of special and general educators’ roles in serving students with disabilities (Stark et al., 2020). Principals in qualitative studies often describe special educators’ instructional roles by highlighting dispositions (e.g., caring about students, patience), but not skills (e.g., providing effective explicit instruction) that they should demonstrate, and by describing special educators’ capacity to obtain students’ behavioral compliance (Roberts et al, 2017; Steinbrecher et al., 2015). For example, Roberts et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study of 12 principals’ perspectives on high-quality instruction for students with severe disabilities. They found that
principals consistently said special educators should be caring and communicate effectively, but principals could not articulate specific instructional practices special educators should use. Further, when describing how they knew a special educator was effective, they did not describe attending to either special educators’ instruction or students’ academic, social, and behavioral growth; instead, they judged special educators’ instruction based on whether special educators were able to obtain student behavioral compliance. In other words, they articulated visions of special educators’ instructional roles in which the core purpose was controlling students rather than teaching them. Roberts et al. (2017) concluded that the traits principals identified (e.g., obtaining compliance) are valuable, but “become problematic when they represent all a teacher does and all an administrator values […] This limited understanding […] reproduces low expectations for students with severe disabilities and their teachers” (p. 13). Importantly, if administrators do not have clear, meaningful conceptions of special and general educators’ instructional roles in serving students with disabilities, they are unlikely to support these roles effectively (Stark et al., 2020).

Curricula
A handful of studies suggest teachers use their instructional curricula to help them conceptualize the purposes of their instructional role for students with disabilities (e.g., Siuty et al., 2018). In particular, the content in teachers’ curricular resources may set implicit expectations about what should be the focus of their instructional efforts. For example, Siuty et al. (2018) examined how 11 middle school special educators’ curricular materials related to how they enacted their instructional role. Special educators who had standardized reading curricula, with a focus on basic skills, oriented their instruction toward building basic skills (e.g., fluency, decoding) in areas where the assessments (from their curricula) indicated a need for support; in contrast, those without standardized reading curricula oriented reading instruction toward a wide range of topics, which one teacher referred to as “mashed together” and “disjointed” (Siuty et al., 2018, p. 47). More research is needed to better understand how curricula may shape teachers’ conceptions and enactment of their roles in serving students with disabilities, but Siuty et al.’s (2018) results are consistent with a robust body of research in general education, which indicates that teachers often adopt instructional approaches embedded in curricular materials, especially early in their careers (Grossman & Thompson, 2008), and that curricula can promote the use of more effective practices (Jackson & Makarin, 2016; Jimenez et al., 2014).

Schedules
Teachers’ schedules determine the time they have available for each of their roles and thus have the potential to constrain how teachers enact their roles (Billingsley et al., 2019). For example, a number of studies have highlighted how limited scheduled time for collaboration may constrain teachers’ ability to fulfill their collaborative roles (e.g., Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Morris Mathews et al., 2020; Scruggs et al., 2007) as a result of which teachers then often report only collaborating “on the fly” (Bettini, Wang et al. 2019, p. 11). Without adequate time dedicated to working with colleagues, special educators report struggling to build shared understandings among various stakeholders (e.g., paraprofessionals, general educators, administrators) about how best to meet student needs (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021).

Schedules can also constrain or facilitate teachers’ instructional roles (Billingsley et al., 2019). For example, in McLeskey et al.’s (2014) case study of an effective inclusive elementary school, the principal highlighted the importance of schedules for ensuring specialists could efficiently coordinate the times when they would serve students. A consistent school-wide instructional schedule made it possible for special educators to fulfill their instructional role for all of their students (McLeskey et al., 2014). In contrast, special educators in some studies report that time limitations sometimes push them to constrain their instructional role. For example, in Bettini et al.’s (2015) study, special
educators reported that, without scheduled time for planning and paperwork, they sometimes planned other activities (e.g., movies, independent seatwork) for students so that they could complete urgent planning and paperwork responsibilities.

Evaluation Instruments and Procedures
In a qualitative study in one middle school, Braun and Youngs (2020) examined how two special and two general educators perceived and experienced new evaluation procedures in their state. They found that the special educators reported the evaluation criteria were misaligned with core aspects of their role, not evaluating, for example, their very significant and time-consuming IEP case management role. Further, because the evaluation system held them accountable for students’ learning on state assessments, special educators reported reevaluating their instructional roles, increasing the priority they placed on standardized curricula while decreasing the priority they placed on individual skill instruction. More research is needed to better understand how evaluation procedures and tools may shape roles, but this study provides some indication that they could contribute to how special educators conceptualize their roles (Braun & Youngs, 2020).

School Poverty
High poverty schools serve students whose communities have often been subject to systematic social disinvestment, which has consequences for schools’ financial resources (e.g., Baker et al., 2020), recruitment and retention of leaders able to support long-term school improvement (e.g., Béteille et al., 2012), expectations for student achievement (e.g., Rubie-Davies et al., 2011), teacher recruitment (e.g., Boyd et al., 2003; Early & Shagoury, 2010), teacher working conditions (e.g., Fall & Billingsley, 2011), and teacher retention (e.g., Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2012). Due to these differences, policies are often enacted differently in high-poverty schools than in low-poverty schools, as local decision makers use their discretion to comply with policy mandates within tighter constraints than low-poverty schools encounter (e.g., Diamond, 2007, 2012; Diamond & Spillane, 2004). No studies have explored if or how special educators’ roles vary in high vs. low poverty schools, but there are some indications that special educators who serve in high-poverty schools may experience substantially different role expectations and supports for fulfilling their roles than special educators in low-poverty schools (Voltz & Fore, 2006).

First, extant research indicates students with disabilities who attend high-poverty schools are significantly less likely to be included in general education settings than students with disabilities who attend low-poverty schools (e.g., Bettini et al., in press; Grindal et al., 2019, 2020; Hehir et al., 2014). For example, analyzing a national dataset, Green et al. (2020) found that, among adolescents with mental health disorders, Black and Latino students—who are disproportionately served in high-poverty schools—are significantly more likely to receive services in separate placements and significantly less likely to have received school counseling (a less restrictive service) as their first form of school-based support for their mental health disorder. Extant research does not indicate why this is the case, but possible explanations include reduced school financial resources (Baker et al., 2020), high administrative turnover (Béteille et al., 2012), and expectations for parent advocacy that are misaligned with parents’ other commitments and cultural expectations (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Skrtic, 2012). Thus, because students in high-poverty schools may be less likely to be placed in inclusive settings, special educators in these schools may be less likely to teach in co-taught or resource service delivery models and may be more likely to teach in self-contained settings.

Second, extant research indicates special educators in high-poverty schools and districts experience significantly more demanding roles, with less support to meet demands, than special educators in low-poverty schools (Fall & Billingsley, 2011). Analyzing a nationally representative survey of special educators from 1999 to 2000, Fall and Billingsley (2011) found that special educators in high poverty districts reported significantly larger caseloads than special educators in low-
poverty schools and that they were significantly more likely to report that routine duties and paperwork interfered with their teaching. Despite increased demands, they were significantly less likely to report having collegial support, principal support, or materials. No recent studies have updated Fall and Billingsley’s (2011) analysis, and it is unclear whether those patterns remain consistent to the present, though recent studies of general educators do confirm that, in general, teachers experience more challenging workloads and fewer supports in high-poverty schools (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Thus, special educators in high-poverty schools may be more likely to experience role overload, when one has too much to do in the time allotted.

Potential Outcomes of Special Educators’ Roles

A number of studies examined how aspects of teachers’ roles are associated with their affective outcomes, such as burnout, and their attrition or intent to leave teaching (e.g., Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Brunsting et al., 2014). In addition, a handful of studies have examined how special educators’ conceptions of their roles are associated with their instruction for students with disabilities (e.g., Urbach et al., 2015).

Burnout and Attrition

Extant research indicates that problems with teachers’ roles are associated with burnout and intent to leave their jobs (e.g., Brunsting et al., 2014; Embich, 2001; Garwood et al., 2018). Burnout is a condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism (also termed depersonalization), and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment; this constellation of symptoms occurs when prolonged stress exhausts one’s resources to cope (Brunsting et al., 2014; Garwood et al., 2018). Burnout is of great concern, as it is associated with educational processes, including implementation fidelity of interventions and teacher-student interactions (Irvin et al., 2013; Oakes et al., 2020; Wehby et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2017). Further, teachers who are more burned out are more likely to intend to leave (Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020; Bettini, Jones et al., 2017), which is of particular concern for special educators, given the chronic national special educator shortage (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

Importantly, teachers’ role problems are associated with negative affective outcomes such as stress and burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Park & Shin, 2020). Role problems include role overload (i.e., feeling one has too many demands within the allotted time), role ambiguity (i.e., uncertainty about core aspects of one’s role), and role conflict (i.e., conflicting expectations for one’s role due to incompatible or inconsistent demands; Embich, 2001). A full discussion of role problems is beyond the scope of this chapter, but we briefly discuss evidence that role problems may be associated with burnout and attrition among special and general educators.

Special Educators

The many demands on special educators, without adequate time and resources to meet those demands (i.e., role overload), can leave special educators feeling burned out and intending to leave (Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020; Embich, 2001). For example, in a survey of 300 secondary special educators, Embich (2001) found that workload was a significant predictor of the emotional exhaustion component of burnout. Similarly, in a survey of novice elementary and middle school teachers, Bettini, Jones, et al. (2017) found that special educators rated their workloads less manageable than novice general educators, and those who felt their workloads were less manageable were significantly more likely to feel emotionally exhausted and to plan to leave. Some aspects of special educators’ roles may be especially important for these outcomes. In particular, extant research indicates special educators are more likely to experience these outcomes when they (a) perceive students have greater behavior
challenges (e.g., Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020; Billingsley, 2007; Conley & You, 2017); (b) report having a larger and/or more complex caseloads (Berry, 2012; Billingsley, 2007; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017); and (c) report higher paperwork demands and/or insufficient time for paperwork (Allbrecht et al., 2009; Berry et al., 2011; Billingsley, 2007). Resources that ameliorate these demands, such as administrative support for managing challenging behavior, may be important for relieving the experience of role overload and sustaining their commitment to stay (Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020; Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Cancio et al., 2013; Garwood et al., 2018). Note, however, that much of this research has focused on special educators in self-contained settings; to our knowledge, no studies have examined factors associated with role overload within inclusive schools (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Role conflict may also contribute to special educators’ burnout and attrition (Embich, 2001; Garwood et al., 2018). In a mixed-methods study of 64 rural special educators, Garwood et al. (2018) found role conflict predicted the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization aspects of burnout. Embich (2001) also identified role conflict as a significant predictor of burnout among secondary special educators. Notably, in Embich’s (2001) study, role conflict was the most significant predictor of emotional exhaustion for special educators who team-taught with general educators. This aligns with other research that has identified collaborating with general educators as a major stressor due to issues such as conflicting perspectives about inclusion, how to best meet students’ needs, and the nature of the special educators’ instructional role in a co-taught setting (e.g., Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021; Mathews et al., 2017; Scruggs et al., 2007).

Role ambiguity, or lack of clarity regarding some aspect of one’s role, is also associated with burnout (Embich, 2001; Garwood et al., 2018). In Garwood et al.’s (2018) study, role ambiguity explained a significant portion of the variance in rural special educators’ sense of personal accomplishment. In their analysis of follow-up interviews, Garwood et al. (2018) found, “Without clear guidelines, even teachers who may be performing well had no idea if they were doing what was expected because most administrators were not offering feedback” (p. 37). Similarly, in Embich’s (2001) study, role ambiguity was associated with a reduced sense of personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion for special educators who team-taught. This finding is also supported by qualitative studies that describe how lack of clear responsibilities, such as ambiguous curricular expectations, can leave special educators feeling confused about what they should be doing (e.g., Youngs et al., 2011).

In a synthesis of research on special educator burnout, Brunsting et al. (2014) corroborated strong support for relationships between role problems and burnout. However, note that most studies on special educators’ role problems have not focused on special educators in elementary schools, and, to our knowledge, none have focused exclusively on inclusive schools.

General Educators

Though many studies have examined factors associated with general educators’ burnout and attrition (e.g., Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino et al., 2006), few studies have examined how general educators’ roles in serving students with disabilities may be associated with their burnout and attrition. Gilmour and Wehby (2019) analyzed North Carolina’s state administrative dataset to examine how serving students with disabilities were related to general educators’ attrition. They found that general education certified teachers who taught more students with disabilities were significantly more likely to leave in the following year, suggesting that their responsibility for teaching more students with disabilities may present general educators with greater demands and that they may often not have adequate resources to meet this demand. However, much more extensive research is needed to understand the potential implications of general educators’ roles in inclusive schools for their burnout and attrition.
Instruction

A small body of work indicates a potential relationship between special educators’ role beliefs and their instructional quality (Morris Mathews, 2018; Urbach et al., 2015). Urbach et al. (2015) used observation scores from a validated measure of explicit, intensive, and individualized reading instruction (Reading in Special Education [RISE]; Brownell et al., 2009) and interview data to examine distinctions between more and less accomplished special educators’ conceptions of their roles. The authors found that special educators who scored higher on RISE (n = 23) believed their roles required providing intensive instruction and maintaining high expectations for students. In contrast, those who scored lower (n = 18) emphasized making learning fun and building relationships. Though both groups emphasized systematic, explicit instructional methods, they differed in terms of the purposes for which they designed explicit instruction. Similarly, Morris Mathews (2018) examined the relationship between three beginning special educators’ role beliefs and their instructional quality. Though instructional quality was generally low across these beginning special educators (with the exception of their classroom environment scores), their beliefs about their instructional role provided a signal regarding the quality of their instruction. Whereas two special educators emphasized building confidence, helping students to become a “better person,” and accessing the general education curriculum, the one participant whose conception of the role included delivering targeted interventions provided instruction that was more purposeful, scaffolded, and explicit.

These studies both drew from small, purposive samples, and they are not generalizable; thus, extant research supports hypotheses but not substantiated conclusions regarding how role conceptions may relate to instruction. Further, to date, no studies have examined relationships between conceptions of role and outcomes among students with disabilities.

Setting the Course for Effective Inclusion

Local leaders and educators have substantial discretion to determine how they conceptualize teachers’ roles in serving students with disabilities (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). And, as we have discussed throughout this chapter, extant research indicates that they do, indeed, conceptualize educators’ roles in widely different ways, and special and general educators’ roles in serving students with disabilities vary greatly across schools (e.g., Bray & Russell, 2018). Though instructional, collaborative, and IEP case management roles are common across settings, the responsibilities embedded in each of these roles, and the core purposes for which educators enact these roles, differ across schools (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2012).

However, we have argued that effective inclusive schools fundamentally depend on shared conceptions of educators’ roles because educators in inclusive schools are interdependent with one another (Bettini 2021 in review), and schools are interdependent with other institutions in their efforts to cultivate and retain a teacher workforce capable of effectively teaching students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2010; Sykes et al., 2010). Shared conceptions of special and general educators’ roles in serving students with disabilities are essential to ensure educators can coordinate their work with one another and crucial to the development of a teacher workforce with the skills and supports needed to enact their roles.

In the following sections, we discuss avenues for first, better understanding what should be special and general educators’ roles in inclusive elementary schools, and second, changing individual and collective beliefs about their roles, to improve how schools support inclusion of students with disabilities. We specifically describe (a) research needed to better understand what roles educators should fulfill in effective inclusive schools; (b) how leaders can foster meaningful roles for special and general educators in inclusive elementary schools; (c) how teacher educators can support these efforts; and (d) what teachers themselves can do. Throughout, our aim is not to prescribe roles or
limit local discretion, but rather to consider how we might collectively build greater consensus about what special and general educators’ roles in serving students with disabilities should be and how we should support those roles in practice.

**Future Research**

Future research has a crucial role to play in helping build consensus about what should be educators’ roles in effective inclusive schools. We particularly recommend that future research systematically examine (a) if students with disabilities are better served when special and general educators’ roles are conceptualized and enacted in particular ways; and (b) what factors shape their conceptions and enactment of their roles. We also describe considerations regarding the research methods needed to fulfill these recommendations.

**Conceptions and Enactment of Roles**

Future research is urgently needed to better understand whether students with disabilities are better served when teachers’ roles are conceptualized and enacted in particular ways. We reviewed a handful of studies indicating students with disabilities may experience stronger instruction when teachers conceptualize disability in particular ways (e.g., Jordan et al., 2010) and orient their work toward promoting strong academic skills (e.g., Mathews, 2018; Urbach et al., 2015). However, these were all small studies, using methods that preclude strong inferences; further, none examined the impacts of role conceptions on students’ outcomes (e.g., achievement, engagement, inclusion).

More extensive research is needed to understand (a) key dimensions of stakeholders’ conceptions of special and general educators’ roles; (b) how these conceptions shape teachers’ enactment of their roles; and (c) effects of different role conceptions/enactment on students’ experiences and outcomes. Such research would help our field determine, empirically, what roles special and general educators should be prepared and supported to fulfill.

For example, scholars could replicate Urbach et al.’s (2015) study, with other populations and in other contexts, to determine what aspects of teachers’ conceptions and enactment of their roles may be shaping their instructional methods and content for students with disabilities. Scholars could also conduct survey studies, similar to Jordan et al.’s (2010) work, to determine whether teachers who conceptualize their roles in particular ways have students who feel more engaged in school, who are more meaningfully included, and who experience stronger outcomes. Likewise, studies could examine whether students experience stronger outcomes when their special educators orient their instructional roles toward promoting foundational skills instruction (e.g., Sayeski et al., 2019) or general education curricular content (e.g., McLaughlin, 2010), and thus help respond to this persistent debate among scholars.

Such research would be especially beneficial if it attended to multiple stakeholders’ conceptions of teachers’ roles. Understanding how administrators’ conceptions of teachers’ roles relate to teachers’ enactment of their roles and their students’ outcomes would be especially valuable for determining what role beliefs leader educators should be trying to promote among leaders; we found only a few studies that examined administrators’ conceptions of teachers’ roles in serving students with disabilities (e.g., Roberts et al., 2017; Steinbrecher et al., 2015), despite robust evidence that administrators play a crucial role in supporting teachers to fulfill meaningful roles in serving students with disabilities (e.g., McLeskey et al., 2014). Similarly, we found few studies that examined general educators’ conceptions or enactment of their roles in serving students with disabilities; some studies included general educators if the school was the unit of analysis (e.g., Bray & Russell, 2018; Olson et al., 2016), but few studies focused on general educators, even though general educators are the main teacher for most students with disabilities.
Factors Shaping Teachers’ Conceptions and Enactment of Their Roles

To develop shared conceptions among stakeholders of special and general educators’ roles, the field needs scholarship examining what factors lead teachers to develop certain conceptions of their roles and what leads them to enact their roles in more or less productive ways. For example, are there aspects of curricula that lead teachers to adopt particular approaches to their instructional roles for students with disabilities? How do interactions with administrators shape teachers’ conceptions of their roles? How do teachers’ conceptions of their roles change when they encounter conditions (e.g., schedules, time constraints) that facilitate or constrain some aspects of their roles? Scholars could investigate these questions using descriptive, correlational, or intervention research. For example, scholars could descriptively use mixed methods to examine how working conditions facilitate or constrain a special educators’ enactment of their role; they could use survey research to test hypotheses generated in that mixed methods investigation; and they could test an intervention to determine whether changing working conditions lead to changes in the enactment of their roles.

Research Methods

A focus on role is distinct from how much special education research has examined teachers’ work. Most special education scholarship has focused on observable, discrete practices (e.g., behavior-specific praise; Royer et al., 2019). This work has been tremendously productive for identifying instructional methods that benefit students with disabilities, but it is quite different from the research we are proposing. Discrete practices, such as behavior-specific praise, may be part of enacting a role; however, when we focus on role, we conceptualize teachers’ work at a broader grain size, asking how discrete practices collectively work together and for what purposes teachers take up these practices. As we have highlighted elsewhere, a special educator may take up a discrete practice (e.g., behavior-specific praise) for a variety of different purposes (e.g., teaching foundational skills, teaching general education curricula, building relationships), depending on how they conceptualize the purpose of their role; and they may use the same discrete practice to promote different student behaviors.

This focus on role thus has implications for the methods scholars use. Some research on role adopts behaviorist measures that are epistemologically aligned with measures used in research on discrete instructional practices. For example, Vannest and Hagan-Burke’s (2010) study used operational definitions of observable activities to examine special educators’ time use. This was a useful study, and a larger-scale replication of it would be of great value.

However, understanding conceptions and enactment of role will also require research from cognitive and social constructivist orientations, as conceptions of role may be internally held or shared among a community and thus may not objectively observable in the ways that discrete instructional practices are. Understanding how educators use their discretion to orient their work toward a purpose requires researchers to invest in more deeply understanding how teachers think about their work, using methods that take their individual and collective sense-making about their roles seriously (e.g., Youngs et al., 2011). Such work would likely benefit from rich qualitative and mixed methods investigations. Latent measures that quantitatively evaluate key dimensions of teachers’ role beliefs, as identified within qualitative and mixed methods research, would be useful for scaling up this research.

Strong theoretical and conceptual foundations are essential for conducting research in robust ways. We found role theory (Biddle, 1986) useful in this chapter and in other investigations (Bettini, Wang et al., 2019). Other potentially useful theories used in some of the stronger studies we reviewed include activity theory (e.g., Gomez-Najarro, 2020), institutional theory (e.g., Bray & Russell, 2018), and sense-making theory (e.g., Youngs et al., 2011). These theories differ in their
core tenets and how they orient researchers to data collection and analysis, but they share a focus on individual and collective conceptions of social phenomena, and thus, they may each have utility for supporting the kind of research we are recommending.

**Implications for School and District Leaders**

School and district leaders bear primary responsibility for structuring schools in which all stakeholders collaborate in service of effective inclusion (Billingsley et al., 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014). Fostering meaningful roles for special and general educators is central to fulfilling this charge.

First, leaders should carefully reflect on their own knowledge and beliefs relevant to special education. Though school leaders seldom receive adequate preparation regarding instruction in special education (Stelitano et al., 2020), resources developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers describe practices that are crucial for the success of students with disabilities across settings (Council of Chief State School Officers & Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform, 2017). Leaders should consult these crucial guidance documents and reach out to district special education personnel to address gaps in their knowledge. We also recommend that school leaders reflect on the beliefs they hold about students with disabilities, critiquing deficit beliefs that could lead them to hold and communicate low expectations for teachers’ instructional roles with students with disabilities (e.g., Roberts et al., 2017; Ruppar et al., 2018; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). Leaders should be mindful that teachers (especially new teachers) look to them for signals on what is expected of students with disabilities, and high expectations are essential to ensure equitable learning opportunities.

Second, we recommend that leaders collaborate with special and general educators, parents, and other stakeholders (e.g., district special education personnel) to craft a vision for their school that is inclusive of and equitable for students with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2017). This work should be done collaboratively, engaging other stakeholders in the process, ensuring their perspectives are valued, and increasing buy-in (Stark et al., 2020). Leaders can then take responsibility for communicating this collective vision explicitly (e.g., in mission statements), and implicitly, for example, through the ways they support decisions to invest time and money in training and materials for teaching students with disabilities (e.g., Bettini, Benedict et al., 2017; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014).

Third, leaders should facilitate conversations regarding the distribution of roles and responsibilities among educators in their school, cultivate buy-in for this division of roles, and communicate this vision clearly to all teachers so that teachers can coordinate their efforts efficiently. While doing so, they should consider whether this distribution reflects the efficient utilization of their expert personnel resources. For example, does the distribution of responsibilities capitalize on special educators’ expertise in instructional strategies and student learning needs (McLeskey et al., 2014)? They should also consider whether school resources and structures appropriately support this distribution of responsibilities. For example, if special and general educators co-teach, do they have time to co-plan (Scruggs et al., 2007)? If special educators modify and accommodate general education curricular content, do they have all relevant curricular materials, such as teacher’s guides and student workbooks (Bettini, Lillis et al., 2021)? If special educators train paraprofessionals, do they have regularly scheduled and dedicated time during paraprofessionals’ workdays and while students are not present to plan for and provide training (Morris Mathews et al., 2021)?

Finally, we recognize that most school leaders do not receive adequate preparation for leading special education (e.g., Petzko, 2008; Stelitano et al., 2020) and may struggle with some aspects of this role. We recommend that leaders look to district special education administrators as resources for learning, as these leaders are likely to understand both the constraints in which school leaders are
operating and the needs of the students and teachers who school leaders are responsible for supporting. Leaders should also consider special educators as an important resource; by deeply engaging with special educators, getting to know the nuts and bolts of their daily work with students, leaders may come to better understand how to effectively support all educators in fulfilling meaningful roles for students with disabilities.

**Implications for Teacher Education**

Experiences in teacher preparation foster educators’ visions for their professional roles, supporting future teachers to develop normative understandings of good teaching and values that shape how they enact their roles (Darling-Hammond et al., 2006; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Kennedy, 2006; Morris Mathews, 2020). To do this in a way that supports effective inclusive schools, we recommend teacher educators make explicit: (1) the purpose of special education, (2) special and general educators’ roles in fulfilling that purpose, and (3) the ways their roles should be coordinated. These three concepts should be presented in consistent ways across preparation (i.e., in course content, assignments, field placements, supervisory relationships) so future teachers can anchor new learning in a clear, practical understanding of their future roles. These three concepts should also be presented in ways that support future teachers to make connections between what is espoused in teacher preparation and the practical realities of their roles in schools (Hammerness & Klette, 2015), including both limiting field placements misaligned with these concepts, and helping future teachers make sense of and respond to placements misaligned with these concepts (Morris-Mathews, 2020). For example, teacher educators should avoid field placements in which special educators do not play a meaningful instructional role; and, if a future teacher is placed in such a setting, teacher educators should help them make sense of why this happens and how to respond. Ensuring consistency in the ways these three concepts are presented is not easy work and likely requires joint efforts to identify and improve courses, field placements, and other experiences. For example, faculty could review syllabi to determine the extent to which courses promote both a clear, consistent vision of inclusive education, as well as competence in the practices necessary to include students with disabilities successfully.

The structure of teacher preparation could contribute to how well special and general educators are prepared for their interdependent roles (Blanton et al., 2018). However, extant research has not explored which models most effectively support future teachers in developing productive conceptions of their roles or fulfilling those roles effectively. In fact, few studies have traced special or general educators from preparation into their in-service roles to determine how preparation relates to in-service enactment of their roles in serving students with disabilities.

In addition to considering internal program structures, teacher educators must also consider their relationships with local school districts (Billingsley et al., 2020). Teacher education is an interdependent endeavor shared by teacher educators and local districts (Leko & Brownell, 2011). Thus, preparation programs cannot merely inform candidates about their future roles; they must also work with local schools to support the development of field placements and in-service contexts that foster meaningful roles for special and general educators (Babione & Shea, 2005; Dieker et al., 2003; Youngs et al., 2011). Grow Your Own (GYO) programs represent a particularly promising approach to coordinating with local districts (Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019). GYO programs recruit individuals already rooted in a community (e.g., paraprofessionals, parents) into teaching (Podolsky et al., 2016) and have the advantage of providing a pathway for more teachers of color to enter the profession (e.g., Quinones, 2018; Wall et al., 2005). For example, in Project CREATE, university and district personnel worked together to improve schools’ capacities to implement evidence-based practices for culturally and linguistically diverse learners while also ameliorating the shortage of special educators in local schools (Peterson et al., 2020). This cross-institutional coordination could
be a way to facilitate special and general educators’ efforts to make sense of and fulfill meaningful roles in inclusive schools.

**Recommendations for Teachers**

Teachers should not, on their own, be charged with settling long-standing debates about the nature of special education, defining their jobs, or advocating for conditions that facilitate their work. Creating clearly defined, well-differentiated, and manageable roles should be the collaborative work of school leaders, policymakers, and teachers. At the same time, teachers are “active decision makers and school change contributors” (Li & Ruppar, 2020, p. 2) with agentic roles in schools. Thus, we provide recommendations for how teachers can foster more meaningful, supported roles for themselves in effective inclusive schools.

First, we encourage teachers to reflect on their beliefs about students and instruction and to consider how these beliefs may be influencing how they conceptualize and enact their roles in serving students with disabilities. As described earlier, how educators conceptualize disability (e.g., Jordan et al., 2010) and the purpose of their roles (e.g., Ruppar et al., 2017; Urbach et al., 2015) may have important implications for the services they provide to students with disabilities. There are many potential dimensions of educators’ beliefs that are worth reflecting on. For example, Ruppar et al. (2018) contrast two perspectives: (1) a deficit vision, in which special educators’ primary role is to “care for the students, maintain safety, and control challenging behavior” and (2) a strengths-based vision in which special educators’ roles are to “build on competencies and raise the expectations of others.” (p. 326). In this chapter, we described other key related beliefs, such as beliefs about whether a disability is inherent to the student or a result of an interaction between students and the environment. We recommend educators reflect on what beliefs may be shaping how they conceptualize and enact their roles, considering whether these beliefs help them foster high expectations, strong learning, and inclusion for their students.

Second, we encourage educators in inclusive schools to take time to develop shared understandings of roles and responsibilities with other professionals in their schools. Shared understandings of roles may help to reduce tension and foster stronger collaboration. When developing shared understandings, educators should consider the strengths and expertise of each professional and how these strengths can be maximized to support student learning.

Finally, teachers should consider any contextual barriers that may be limiting their capacity to fulfill their role consistent with high expectations. In these cases, rather than lowering their expectations (as some teachers have reported doing; Bettini, Wang et al., 2019), they should consider what advocacy efforts might remove these barriers (Brownell, 2020; Cornelius & Gustafson, 2020). For example, in Bettini, Lillis et al.’s (2021) study, a special educator described collecting data to demonstrate, to administrators, that some students were often missing instruction when a peer had significant behavior challenges, using these data to advocate for more personnel resources for her program. A recent special issue of *Teaching Exceptional Children* provides guidelines for self-advocacy that teachers can use to remove barriers to high expectations (e.g., Cornelius & Gustafson, 2020). Though educators should not have to fight for manageable workloads or adequate resources, the reality is that they may sometimes need to educate others about the nature of their work and how they experience their role.

**Conclusions**

Educational systems for students with disabilities are fundamentally interdependent; multiple institutions are interdependent with one another in cultivating the special and general education teacher workforce, while special and general educators are interdependent with one another (and...
with other stakeholders) in serving students with disabilities in inclusive schools. Interdependence necessitates shared understandings of the roles special and general education teachers should be prepared and supported to fulfill. Yet, despite general consensus on the long-term aims of special education services, extant scholarship and policy reflect deep divides regarding core aspects of special and general educators’ roles in serving students with disabilities, while special and general educators’ experiences in schools often reflect limited support and guidance for fulfilling meaningful roles in serving students with disabilities. We contend that addressing these issues should be an urgent priority for our field, which will likely require more extensive research on special and general educators’ roles, as well as open conversations among varied stakeholders about how their roles should be constructed to most meaningfully support equitable, inclusive educational opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities.

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