“Not as Systematic as Maybe I’d Like It to Be”: Special Education Administrators’ Professional Development Planning for Teachers of Students With ASD

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Abstract:

Federal mandates require special education teachers to implement evidence-based practices (EBPs) to support student learning to the extent practical. There are 28 identified EBPs specifically designed for teaching students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Preparing special education teachers to implement EBPs with fidelity remains a challenge. Planning and executing professional development (PD) targeting EBPs is typically a role assumed by special education administrators. This qualitative phenomenological research study examines special education administrators' capacity to develop and implement effective PD around EBPs identified for students with ASD. Findings suggest special education administrators are committed to improving classroom-based application of EBPs specific to meeting the unique needs of students with ASD through collaborative efforts. Challenges exist related to the gap between knowledge and practice and the duality of systems in education.

Keywords: Professional Development | Autism Spectrum Disorder | Educator Training | Qualitative | Evidence-Based Practices.

*****Note: Full text of article below**

"Not as Systematic as Maybe I'd Like It to Be": Special Education Administrators' Professional Development Planning for Teachers of Students With ASD

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- **Preparing special education teachers to implement EBPs with fidelity remains a challenge. Planning and executing professional development (PD) targeting EBPs is typically a role assumed by special education administrators.**
- **This qualitative phenomenological research study examines special education administrators' capacity to develop and implement effective PD around EBPs identified for students with ASD.**
- **Findings suggest special education administrators are committed to improving classroom-based application of EBPs specific to meeting the unique needs of students with ASD through collaborative efforts. Challenges exist related to the gap between knowledge and practice and the duality of systems in education.**

Key words: Professional Development, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Educator Training, Qualitative, Evidence-Based Practices.

The national prevalence for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is currently one in 36 (National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, 2023). Students with ASD who receive special education require specially designed instruction to meet their unique needs (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEA], 2004). Evidence-based practices (EBPs) have been identified for students with ASD to promote effective skill improvements in several areas (e.g., cognitive, communication, social, academic, motor, play, and adaptive/self-help; Steinbrenner et al., 2020). Yet many special education teachers report a lack of knowledge and confidence to implement such EBPs with students with ASD (Hendricks, 2011; Layden, Maydosz, et al., 2022). For teachers who are already working in schools with students with ASD, professional development (PD) is one method to improve their knowledge and skills. Yet special education administrators report having less time than they would like to provide PD opportunities for special education teachers (Hussey et al., 2019). Nonetheless, special education administrators often play a key role in selecting the interventions and strategies of focus for PD for their teachers (Brock et al., 2014).

Students with ASD

Students with ASD present with a range of skills, knowledge, and capabilities. ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder with varying impairment in social communication skills and restrictive and repetitive patterns of behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). During the 2020–2021 year, the category of autism accounted for approximately 12% of the population of students receiving special education services in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), which consists of 829,145 students from ages three to 21 (Office of Special Education Programs 2022a, 2022b). The prevalence of ASD is also increasing; during the 2015–2016 school year, there were a reported 622,755 students with ASD as compared with the 2020–2021 data. With the increase in prevalence of students with ASD continuing, special education teachers as well as other educators should expect to regularly work with students with ASD in their classrooms. Because of this, it is timely and necessary that special education administrators are prepared to support these teachers to ensure success for students with ASD.

EBPs and ASD

Federal legislation, including the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) and IDEA (2004), requires teachers to use EBPs to support student learning. EBPs are the "implementation of practices shown by scientific research to reliably cause an increase in student performance" (Cook & Odom, 2013, p. 135). Through a large-scale systematic review of the literature spanning 27 years, which built on previous work by Wong et al. (2014), the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice identified 28 EBPs for individuals with ASD (Steinbrenner et al., 2020; see *Table 1* for a complete list). Once identified, Steinbrenner et al. (2020) also provided the existing evidence for the EBP that included the age range examined and outcome areas impacted within the reviewed research. To date, this serves as the most comprehensive review of identified EBPs for students with ASD encompassing the literature from 1990 through 2017 (Steinbrenner et al., 2020).

When teachers working with children with ASD implement EBPs with fidelity, students achieve learning outcomes at a high rate (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010). However, many teachers report that they do not feel prepared to implement EBPs (Hendricks, 2011; Layden, Maydosz, et al., 2022; Morrier et al., 2011). One study indicates that fewer than 15% of teachers working with students with ASD have received formal training from their teacher preparation programs (Morrier et al., 2011). Similarly, in a national survey, Layden, Maydosz,

Table 1
Evidence-Based Practices Identified by Steinbrenner et al. (2020)

Evidence-based practice	Acronym
Antecedent-based intervention	ABI
Augmentative and alternative communication	AAC
Behavioral momentum	BM
Cognitive behavioral/instructional strategies	CBIS
Differential reinforcement for alternative, incompatible, or other behavior	DRA/I/O
Direct instruction	DI
Discrete trial training	DTT
Exercise and movement	EXM
Extinction	EXT
Functional behavioral assessment	FBA
Functional communication training	FCT
Modeling	MD
Music-mediated intervention	MMI
Naturalistic intervention	NI
Parent-implemented intervention	PII
Peer-based instruction and intervention	PBII
Prompting	PP
Reinforcement	R
Response interruption/redirection	RIR
Self-management	SM
Sensory integration	SI
Social narratives	SN
Social skills training	SST
Task analysis	TA
Technology-aided instruction and intervention	TAII
Time delay	TD
Video modeling	VM
Visual supports	VS

et al. (2022) find that special education teachers reported having little to no training on EBPs and did not feel confident in implementing them. These findings further echo previous research studies emphasizing the lack of training for special education teachers in implementing EBPs (e.g., Marder & deBettencourt, 2015). Additionally, previous research indicates that teachers who do receive training do so through a stand-alone workshop or trial and error of their own practices in the classrooms (Morrier et al., 2011) and still desire more training (Peterson-Ahmad et al., 2018).

Lack of training is likely to contribute to lack of implementation. For example, educators reported extremely low levels of implementing EBPs for students with ASD with more than 77% of responses indicating participants had implemented an EBP less than once per week or not at all (Layden, Maydosz, et al., 2022). Similarly, Morrier et al. (2011) find that only 5% of teachers in their study used research-based practices for students with ASD. Thus, a need remains to increase practical application of EBPs when supporting students with ASD.

Lack of training is likely to contribute to lack of implementation.

Role of the Administrator

Given the lack of training and preparation for working with students with ASD, in-service teachers need PD to learn about EBPs and implement them successfully. The responsibility to arrange and sometimes even deliver PD for teachers frequently falls on the administrators. Therefore, administrators need to have experience and expertise to meet their teachers' needs to result in effective improvement of teacher practices. Unfortunately, administrators can also lack knowledge and confidence about EBPs (Hughes et al., 2012; Layden, Maydosz, et al., 2022). More research is needed in this area to understand contributing factors to administrators' lack of knowledge and confidence in implementing effective practices for students with ASD. Still, special education administrators should be concerned about the effective implementation of special education services to meet the standard of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE; Fan et al., 2019).

Additionally, new knowledge about EBPs is constantly evolving (e.g., Steinbrenner et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2014); thus, teachers and administrators need to continually enhance their knowledge and skills to facilitate practical applications of EBPs in the classroom. Administrators must ensure teachers are provided with professional growth opportunities (Miller, 2018) to maximize student success, and students with disabilities typically fall under the purview of a special education administrator's role (Fan et al., 2019). For our purposes, "special education administrator" is defined as a professional with formal responsibility to oversee the implementation of special education programming and services. Special education administrators differ from building administrators (e.g., principals) in that they are administrators at the district level (e.g., special education directors, instructional specialists, autism coordinators, or behavior specialists).

These administrators can support teachers through high-quality and targeted PD opportunities specific to students with ASD and their needs (Layden, Lorio-Barsten, et al., 2022). Unfortunately, special education administrators reported they may not have expertise in all disability areas and may not feel adequately prepared to provide high-quality and targeted PD opportunities for students with ASD (Hughes et al., 2012; Layden, Lorio-Barsten, et al., 2022; Layden, Maydosz, et al., 2022; Luckner & Movahedazarhouligh, 2019; Miller, 2015). Further, approximately half of the special education administrators surveyed by Luckner and Movahedazarhouligh (2019) reported feeling challenged or very challenged when it came to developing and implementing PD activities to improve instructional practices that lead to better student outcomes. It is essential for teachers to gain knowledge surrounding best practices through PD (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), yet it is also important to understand how special education administrators engage in the development and implementation of such opportunities.

Effective PD Using Implementation Science

Given the gap between EBPs and lack of their implementation, special education administrators must reexamine the ways they design and deliver PD for teachers who work with children with ASD.

Change and innovations "are not self-implementing" (Fixsen et al., 2015, p. 695). Knowledge of EBPs provides educators with a foundation of what practices to implement. However, solely knowing the EBPs does not lay a path for implementation. Implementation science is the bridge between knowing and doing (Fixsen et al., 2015). Administrators bear the responsibility to design a systemic approach to PD to ensure that this bridging between knowledge and practice occurs. They can leverage the implementation science model to systemically create effective PD. Effective PD can then contribute to shifting the practice of teachers who work with children with ASD and foster the improved implementation of EBPs with fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2015; Harn et al., 2013).

Given the gap between EBPs and lack of their implementation, special education administrators must reexamine the ways they design and deliver PD for teachers who work with children with ASD.

Broadly, implementation science is founded on a formula that effective interventions combined with effective implementation yield improved outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2013). The field of ASD has identified effective interventions (e.g., Steinbrenner et al., 2020). Thus, it is up to school districts and, by extension, special education administrators to ensure effective implementation. Despite this simplistic explanation, the implementation of this model to improve outcomes for students with ASD may be quite complex.

To ensure effective implementation, Fixsen et al. (2015) present evidence to support three primary drivers of change, which include organization, leadership, and competency drivers. Organization drivers include systems intervention, facilitative administration, and a decision support data system (Fixsen et al., 2015) and "are used to intentionally develop the supports and infrastructures needed to create a hospitable environment for new programs and innovations" (National Implementation Research Network, "Organization Drivers" section, n.d., para. 1). The second set of drivers, leadership drivers, includes technical and adaptive leadership (Fixsen et al., 2015). This set of drivers is critical to ensure forward momentum. Finally, "skilled use of innovations" (Fixsen et al., 2015, p. 699) is the focus of the competency drivers, which include selection, training, and coaching. Performance assessment is an additional component of this model, which is where the organization and competency drivers meet (Fixsen et al., 2015). With the implementation science approach, PD may be more effective for teachers if leadership encompasses the three primary drivers of change (Fixsen et al., 2015). This model lends itself well to the context of special education administrators and attempting to advance teacher implementation of EBPs to improve outcomes for students with ASD. Please see *Table 2* for a brief overview of the drivers and their components.

Table 2
Components of the Fixsen et al. (2015) Model

Drivers	Components
Competency	Selection
	Training
	Coaching
Organization	Systems intervention
	Facilitative administration
	Decision support data system
Leadership	Technical
	Adaptive

Effective PD can provide several benefits. Providing effective PD opportunities can support teachers in implementing innovative, effective approaches in their classrooms and can improve teachers' perceptions of their abilities and skills to implement effective practices (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Further, when teachers implement EBPs with fidelity, child outcomes improve (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010). Hughes et al. (2012) suggest, however, that special education administrators report challenges in developing and implementing PD for educators working with students with ASD. There is also a scarcity of research related to the processes of developing and implementing effective PD for teachers working with students with ASD by special education administrators.

In this study, the researchers sought to understand the phenomenon experienced by special education administrators responsible for developing and implementing PD for teachers of students with

ASD. This study produced such rich data from the participants that the authors chose to present their findings in two separate papers. The first paper focuses on findings around the competency driver (Layden, Lorio-Barsten, et al., 2022). The current article specifically focuses on the organizational and leadership drivers.

As a continuation of previous work (Layden, Lorio-Barsten, et al., 2022), this manuscript uses the overarching research question to guide the study of what the lived experiences of special education administrators are when planning and implementing professional development for educators working with students with ASD. Special education administrators' views of their roles in fostering teacher implementation of EBPs for students with ASD is also considered.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 10 special education administrators. Two criteria were set for participation: (a) participants had at least 3 years of experience working as a special education administrator (e.g., special education director, special education specialist or coordinator) in a public school setting, and (b) participants self-reported having a role in developing and implementing PD experiences for their educators who supported students with ASD.

Participants were recruited through a convenience sample of professionals known to the authors. This sampling procedure was chosen to ensure participants had the lived experiences under investigation to ensure rich and informative data. Additionally, data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed and/or engaging in virtual instruction, which created challenging barriers to data collection. This study was approved by the university's institutional review board. Participants were not provided any incentives for participating.

The 10 special education administrators who participated all identified as female, which results in our use of "she" when referring to participants as this was their reported preferred pronoun. Participants included three directors of special education, four behavior specialists who support students with ASD, one autism specialist, and two program specialists for special education. Experience of the participants varied with a range of 3–22 years and a mean of 10.7 years. There was representation from urban, suburban, and rural school districts along with varied school district size. Our participants represented four medium suburban districts, two small rural districts, one large urban district, and one large suburban district. The other two participants represented regional programs that comprised multiple school districts. Please see *Table 3* for a summary of demographic information.

Table 3
Demographics of Participants

Area	Participant Information
Roles	3 special education directors
	4 behavior support specialists who support ASD
	2 program specialists for special education
	1 autism specialist
Experience	M = 10.7 years (range = 3–22 years)
Type of division	4 medium suburban
	2 small rural
	2 regional programs
	1 large urban
	1 large suburban

Note. ASD = autism spectrum disorder.

Research Design

This study focuses on understanding the lived experiences of public school special education administrators, particularly related to the way they design and provide PD to teachers and other professionals who support students with ASD. The authors selected a qualitative phenomenological research design to honor the complexity of lived experiences of administrators as their roles frequently require them to juggle many responsibilities. Phenomenology helps researchers examine the essence of the lived experiences of several individuals who have all experienced a particular phenomenon and how they made meaning of these experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Here, the phenomenon under study is the design and delivery of professional development.

Table 4

Interview Questions

Questions
• How do you professionally support teachers who work with students with ASD?
• What kinds of activities do you provide for professional development for teachers who work with students with ASD?
• How do you decide what you provide for your teachers related to ASD?
• How do you decide how professional development is provided for teachers?
• What do you consider when planning for professional development for your teachers who work with students with ASD?
• In an ideal world, how would you plan for professional development to ensure it is effective for teachers?
• What is your perception about what teachers who work with students with ASD need when receiving professional development?
• When you are developing professional development for teachers of students with ASD, what process do you follow?
• Are there professional development activities you wish you could provide for teachers who work with students with ASD and if so, can you describe them?
• How do you target teachers who may not consistently work with students with ASD but may have them in their class at some point?
• Is there anything I haven't asked that you wish to share?

To honor the participants' experiences, the authors grounded this study in the interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretive researchers suspend their own assumptions as much as possible and instead focus on the ways their participants think, feel, and act in their specific circumstances (Hammersley, 2013). The authors engaged in bracketing, a process of separating qualities that belong to the researchers' experiences around the phenomenon (Drew, 2004). Whereas the authors have previously served in the roles of special education administrators and/or special education teachers supporting students with ASD, there was purposeful engagement in drawing awareness to presuppositions regarding the topic and continuously reflected to ensure the effects of preconceptions were bracketed and mitigated across all stages of this study.

Procedures

The special education administrators in this study participated in two semistructured interviews to obtain rich data. Semistructured interviews start with questions predetermined by the researchers and transition to follow-up questions based on what participants share (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Edwards & Holland, 2013). Such interviews offer the participants an opportunity to express their own views and expand on their ideas (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). All participants familiarized themselves with written information about the study and, prior to the interview, consented to the interviews being recorded in Zoom.

The first interview began with the predetermined questions (please see *Table 4*; Layden, Lorio-Barsten, et al., 2022).

The first interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes and included the interviewer asking clarifying questions and paraphrasing what participants shared to ensure understanding. The second interviews were conducted after the first author coded the initial interview transcripts and generated additional follow-up questions intended to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. Following the interviews, the participants each received a written summary of their interview to confirm, revise, or further clarify their comments. All participants confirmed that the summaries captured what they shared during their interviews. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, an online web-conferencing tool, and were recorded.

Data Analysis

The first author coded each of the interview transcripts and followed Wertz's (2005) four steps of data analysis: reviewing the transcript as a whole, breaking each transcript into units of meaning, coding each unit of meaning, and synthesizing codes into overarching themes. During the coding, the first author began with a priori codes based on the Fixsen

et al. (2015) components in the model (i.e., systems intervention, facilitated administration, decision support data system, technical leadership, adaptive leadership). Each discrete idea expressed by the participants was coded. Additional emergent codes were added as participants shared their experiences, and those experiences reflected novel ideas, not captured by the Fixsen et al. (2015) model. For example, a code of collaborative leadership emerged and was added to the codebook.

Next, codes were reviewed and grouped together. Data analysis included a peer debriefing to ensure the continued practice of bracketing, further separating the author's experiences from the participants', and refining themes. The debriefing occurred during the synthesis of the codes and naming of the themes to reflect the underlying concepts and meaning.

Results

This study produced such rich data from the participants that the authors chose to present their findings in two separate papers. The first paper focused on findings around competency drivers (Layden, Lorio-Barsten, et al., 2022). The current article specifically focuses on the organizational and leadership drivers as these drivers are most pertinent to the roles of special education administrators. The following themes emerged for the participants: collaborative positioning, commitment to removing barriers, a broken bridge between knowledge and practice, and the duality of systems.

Theme 1: Collaborative Positioning

Participants emphasized their belief in collaborative leadership and expressed that they perceived themselves to be collaborative leaders. Each of the participants was in an administrative role, and they shared ways in which they work to support their teachers and other educators in order to support students with ASD. "Just by the nature of the job, I'm always assisting," was representative of sentiments multiple participants provided.

The key feature of collaboration was highlighted by the administrators throughout their interviews. Collaboration was described as sharing a vision, seeking feedback and input from others, or empowering others. There were many comments on having a shared vision in terms of the purpose of PD regardless of the topic. All the participants agreed that there is a need to obtain feedback to make decisions about PD. For example, one administrator commented on how she looks to obtain feedback from building administrators to learn about their needs in their schools, and others described collaborating with other special education administrators and staff to determine needs as well as logistical components. Additionally, collaboration extended to "empowering teachers and building their confidence" by building partnerships not only with them, but with other specialists, particularly those with autism experience, such as autism coordinators or instructional specialists in their districts.

The key feature of collaboration was highlighted by the administrators throughout their interviews.

Even when discussing the supporting of and working with teachers, the administrators framed many of their responses in terms of collaborating with them rather than acting in a hierarchical position. Many of the participants discussed having a positive relationship with them. Positive relationships were developed by connecting with teachers and "valu[ing] people for their knowledge and skills they bring to the table." One participant, who is a behavior specialist in a regional program, stressed that "it's a more enriching experience if you view it as a reciprocal learning experience rather than just going in and telling them everything you know." The administrators stated their awareness of their own responsibilities while valuing the knowledge, skills, and experiences that their teachers and other special education administrators bring with them.

Furthermore, the administrators shared their great desire to ensure that teachers were supported, and that support, in their eyes, included modeling. To illustrate this, one special education director from a suburban district stated, "Teachers are their worst critics. . .and they should be, you know, so we try to model our expectations for the kind of instruction that teachers do in the classroom." However, not everyone needs this level of support. Similar to their own expectations of themselves, administrators in this study hoped that teachers would reach out to

them or other specialists in their district when they needed assistance. One participant, who works as a program coordinator, stated, "For the population that we work with, it's critical to ensure that our teachers feel supported."

Theme 2: Commitment to Removing Barriers

Even though the participants were in administrative roles, they had varying authority within their school districts with most of them sharing that they viewed their roles as more supportive than authoritative. Thus, many of the participants shared challenges that exist at a systemic level but are outside their area of control. One participant, who is an autism specialist, described this: "We know what we're supposed to do but we can't always do it." One such challenge was the time to engage in training. Participants frequently cited time as a barrier as most of the administrators could not control the allocation of time to PD activities. Additional barriers identified by participants included a lack of a systemic process, a lack of meaningful real-time data to aid the decision-making process, and unique barriers brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though participants identified barriers, there was a strong stated commitment to removing these barriers to ensure teachers were supported. As part of the solution to removing barriers, planning was at the core of the discussion on this theme. Participants discussed various aspects of planning: planning with the end in mind, creating a set PD schedule, and including follow-up activities. "Planning with the end in mind, I think we can often get lost when we don't have that end goal" was shared by one participant, a behavior specialist in a suburban school district. This means ensuring that PD is not sporadic or disconnected from the needs of their teachers and others in the district. A set schedule helps everyone with the expectations for PD, which helps teachers to plan for themselves and assists with buy-in, which was discussed by multiple participants. To the participants, planning also included follow-up with the teachers to address potential questions and feedback. Administrators in this study saw these tasks as part of their responsibility to ensure PD was effective.

A prevalent concern expressed by the majority of participants was the lack of meaningful real-time data, needed for the decision-making process to inform their ability to develop and implement effective PD. This concern directly impacted the planning of PD, resulting in what some shared was that PD "is not as systematic as maybe I'd like it to be." For our participants, data played a vital role in identifying PD for teachers. They described the importance of data but did not generally get too in-depth with the "what" or "how" of data. The emphasis of depending on data was evident, but from where that data came was less clear from the participants. Self-assessments for teachers as well as needs assessments were mentioned as means to obtain continual feedback about areas of need for teachers and other staff members. Two of the participants discussed sending out surveys to staff at the end of the year to gather topics of interest for the following year. Three of the participants also discussed using a systematic observation tool of classrooms to gather data to determine needs. One participant mentioned asking their principals to do fidelity checks and observations to garner additional data to help them make decisions. Additionally, while the administrators in the study attempted to gain feedback about the topics for PD, a few participants suggested, "I don't think we ask them how they want it; I just think we're thrilled that we have something," which relates to having PD that is specific to special education and, in particular, ASD. One participant, a behavior specialist in a suburban district, discussed the multiple sources of data needed to triangulate their findings before planning PD:

> I think it's really about understanding the needs of the [district], the teachers, and the students. So having those assessments, having data drive where PD comes from, so that's sending out surveys for teachers, administrators, central office staff that would be, you know, even doing formal or informal interviews; usually we do something more informal there where you're getting an anecdotal response. And then you're looking at statewide data; you're looking at, you know, the indicators, the special ed indicators and the special education report to say, you know, what is going really well.

Regarding developing and implementing effective PD, participants talked about how, although they may not be doing as much as they like, they could impact logistical components to help facilitate PD. For example, participants discussed arranging

for release time, scheduling PD at times that work for their teachers while trying to not impact family time, keeping PD sessions short so as not to overwhelm teachers, and being consistent to ensure teachers feel supported.

Much of the content under this theme revolved around dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges that had brought to supporting students with ASD. Barriers such as not being able to be in the same room or working through technology issues were prevalent in the interviews. Providing PD during the 2020–2021 school year posed many challenges for the administrators in the study because they had to change the manner in which they provided PD. Participants expressed that getting buy-in was different in that some teachers were overwhelmed and the topics had to shift to providing virtual instruction but that teachers wanted to connect. One participant, a program specialist from a large district, shared she felt she was "losing touch with [her] teachers. . .and so we were trying to figure out how can we stay in touch and finish the year strong." Another participant explained she had done a coffee time with her teachers to discuss how to overcome barriers, but now they had to do that virtually. However, one key component was clear: "If you don't get to know your staff, it's very hard to connect with them." Ultimately, the participants expressed the need to balance staying connected while leaving "flexibility in place so that we can switch gears and adapt." However, most of the participants shared that providing PD using a virtual model was a good solution to some of their barriers they had previously experienced.

Theme 3: Broken Bridge Between Knowledge and Practice

Participants identified several problems experienced with designing and implementing effective PD that was beyond logistical and procedural barriers. They shared their understanding that knowledge exists around EBPs for students with ASD, which they felt was different from many other disability categories. However, moving beyond knowledge to implementation of EBPs was important for participants, which is where they felt things broke down. Whereas the knowledge may exist, there are many competing demands in the classroom, making it difficult to apply the knowledge to classroom practice.

Participants spoke to their own knowledge of EBPs with most admitting they did not have as much knowledge about EBPs for students with ASD as they wished they had. Yet the administrators in this study expressed a desire to keep learning. The need for additional training for themselves was expressed by multiple participants with one sharing her wish, "to get the training in more types of evidence-based practice strategies." One participant, an autism specialist, summarized, "You just have to keep learning; you have to be a lifelong learner, just like we want our students to be, and being able to bring back that information and share it with teachers is something that I really, really enjoy."

Once training occurs, there should be the implementation of the EBPs learned. One participant, a behavior specialist from a rural district, stated she'd "used fidelity checklists for specific skills or evidence-based practices that [they've] been targeting." This also includes the need for feedback from the staff and observations to ensure implementation is occurring and to evaluate its effectiveness. One participant, another specialist in a suburban district, described how multiple special education administrators in her district use the same checklists or items for which they are looking so they can share the task of completing fidelity checks in classrooms. Similarly, a special education director in a rural district, explained how she worked with principals in their classroom walk-throughs. The fidelity checks that are done vary from checklists to specific targeted skills to a matrix (as described by one participant), but they are focused on attempting to move from training to implementation of skills.

Many of them described measures they are taking to promote fidelity of implementation of the EBPs for students with ASD. Several stated their focus on using EBPs from reputable sources such as the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder. There was an acknowledgement of the need to ensure PD opportunities were not just available for teachers, but also for paraprofessionals, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and other staff to ensure that students with ASD were supported effectively in their entire school environment. However, there was also agreement that training looked different for different groups of staff members.

There were also multiple comments about providing ongoing PD opportunities because, as one participant stated, "You never know when you're going to have a student with autism in your classroom." PD, from the participants' perspective, should be cyclical, so you repeat sessions systematically to ensure that people get the information they need and that professionals are never done learning. Another participant, a special education director in a suburban district, described her implementation process for PD:

> Then, of course, we decide, you know, what kind of training should that be and when can we deliver it, how can we reinforce what's been taught, and then how can we monitor it and assess whether it was successful. And this is something that needs to be done every year.

Theme 4: Duality of Systems

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges discussed at the systems level was the division between general and special education. Participants saw these two systems as separate with little overlap. They identified differing needs for the students and the teachers in each of these systems. They also shared that they believed there were different indicators for success that exist in general education versus special education. For example, one participant, a regional program specialist, stated,

> The special education department and the general education department, I feel, like kind of do their own thing. They have their own PDs on whatever it is they're doing, and we have our own, and they, they don't often mesh until there's a student who is in the classroom, who is having some challenges and needs more support.

Similarly, there were concerns expressed about building administrators in that they may not fully understand ASD and what instruction looks like for these students, particularly if they have more significant impairments. One of the administrators shared, "I think the hardest group to provide professional development to is building administrators because, as a special ed director, I don't supervise teachers." Multiple participants agreed that they needed to "rely on building administrators to monitor what happens in the classrooms" despite building administrators not having the knowledge or skills the participants would have liked to see in building administrators related to ASD. For example, one participant, a special education director in a rural district, offered that, whereas building administrators understand engagement and what it looks like in the general education classroom, they don't often know how to support special education practices or offer PD practices outside of general education. With things being separate between general and special education, one participant, a behavior specialist in a rural district, suggested a shift toward a more inclusive culture: "I want it to be such a part of the culture that professional learning is what we do," and "not having special education be this separate thing over here has got to be key." Ultimately, participants were suggesting inclusive practices at the administrative level, which included modeling inclusion for the rest of the district. One participant, a special education director within a suburban district, aptly stated, it is important "that we talk about students with autism as a regular part of everything because they are a regular part of everything."

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges discussed at the systems level was the division between general and special education.

Discussion

This study focuses on special education administrators and their lived experiences in planning, implementing, and evaluating the effectiveness of PD targeted for teachers and other educators supporting students with ASD. The special education administrators who participated in this study see themselves as collaborative leaders who seek input from their teachers, other administrators, and other educators yet described a duality of systems between special and general education that creates barriers. These barriers can be logistical, such as time and planning needs, and can also be substantive, particularly around knowledge and expertise. Kretlow and Bartholomew (2010) highlight the need for teachers working with students with ASD to know and implement EBPs with fidelity to

achieve learning outcomes at a faster rate, but the people responsible for ensuring teachers know and can implement EBPs admit their own lack of knowledge in this area, which is consistent with previous research as well (e.g., Hughes et al., 2012; Layden, Maydosz, et al., 2022). Additionally, the participants identified that the building administrators, frequently responsible for monitoring teacher performance, have an even greater lack of knowledge around EBPs for students with ASD. Of course, this can all impact the need to provide FAPE for students with ASD.

It is clear from the participants' experiences that they highly value meaningful and effective PD. However, interestingly, the participants agreed that navigating the logistical and procedural facets of PD remains a challenge. Whereas they admitted their own shortcomings in knowledge around EBPs, the special education administrators expressed their commitment to improve. They also highlighted the need to ensure others improve as demonstrated by the logistical barriers identified. Collectively, they emphasized their commitment to removing those barriers and even provided suggestions for how to do so. Specifically, many participants agreed that virtual PD opportunities brought on because of the COVID-19 pandemic solved some of the logistical barriers experienced previously but that connection with teachers was paramount.

Limitations

Whereas the findings of this study are informative, the results should be considered with the following limitations in mind. First, the sample only included 10 special education administrators, and thus, caution should be exercised when considering generalization of findings. Second, a convenience sample was used to ensure participants shared the lived experience of designing and implementing professional development for teachers and others regarding ASD, which may also limit generalization. Third, a single researcher coded all the interviews, and whereas peer debriefing was used during the synthesis, this may impact the data analysis. Despite the highlighted limitations, recommendations for practice are offered.

Implications for Practice

Special education administrators need to ensure they have the knowledge to support teachers and others working with students with ASD. It is admirable that the participants in this study expressed their commitment to learning, but with the variety of demands they experience, they may need to also collaborate with others. First, they can collaborate with those who can impact the system process (e.g., general education administrators, human resources personnel, and superintendents). Second, they can also collaborate with those professionals who hold specific knowledge about EBPs for students with ASD to ensure that the necessary knowledge to support educators is accessible within the district. Thus, special education administrators need either to gain the required knowledge themselves or find others to serve in this role.

Additionally, while seeing themselves as collaborative leaders, the identification of dual systems is troubling. It is imperative for special education administrators to forge collaborative relationships with building administrators and work to ensure shared accountability. This may be further supported by looking for data systems that have shared measures across special and general education students. Students with ASD should be viewed as students shared across general and special education as they are served across the continuum of placement and services. All educators are likely to support students with ASD at some point, and with the ever-growing prevalence (Maenner et al., 2021; National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, 2023), it does not appear that will change.

Special education administrators may also want to seek out creative methods for ensuring effective PD. The participants interviewed provided examples that appear to heavily rely on workshop or "sit and get" methods. Even when delivered virtually, they described transmission of knowledge rather than a focus on application. Participants identified application of knowledge as important but did not provide examples around this. In previous work (Layden, Lorio-Barsten, et al., 2022), it was found that participants had a commitment to coaching as a method for application yet admitted their own challenges with such models as well. Other creative methods for ensuring effective PD may involve greater use of virtual technologies. Special education administrators may need to gain skills in virtual instruction and technology that can effectively be used for PD purposes. This may also result in a need for ensuring strong technological infrastructures accessible for all educators in a district.

Institutes of higher education can also have a role in this area of challenge. Providing preservice teachers with a stronger knowledge base regarding EBPs and students with ASD is critical. Preservice teachers transitioning to in-service teachers have many challenges, and working to gain basic instructional knowledge for their students should not be one of those, particularly as it impacts the students. However, higher education also needs to provide stronger instruction for special education administrators to provide effective PD, which is consistent with recommendations from Luckner and Movahedazarhouligh (2019).

In conclusion, 10 special education administrators shared their lived experiences regarding designing and providing PD experiences for teachers and other educators working with students with ASD. Overall, participants expressed the importance of providing effective PD to this group of educators and their commitment to doing so but identified several barriers they continue to experience. Although committed to removing those barriers, the dual systems of special and general education, the broken bridge between knowledge and practice, and their own identified limitations have proven difficult to overcome. Special education administrators need to continue in their commitment with a collaborative approach to share accountability for students with ASD and support the teachers to improve student outcomes.

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