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Defining the Core of Teaching Quality in Special Education: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Special Educators' Roles

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Title of your paper: Defining the Core of Teaching Quality in Special Education: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Special Educators' Roles

Abstract (300 words)

Conceptions of professional role contribute to educators' enactment of teaching quality (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). This is particularly salient in the field of special education, where special educators' professional experiences are marked by role conflict, overload, and ambiguity (e.g., Gersten et al., 2001). These role problems likely shape their conceptions and theories of high-quality instruction (e.g., Mathews, 2022; Ruppert et al., 2018) and the quality of instruction they provide to students with disabilities (e.g., Urbach et al., 2015). In this presentation, we share findings from a systematic review of the research (n = 67) regarding special educators' professional roles and the ways these that roles are shaped by schools as organizations. Preliminary findings indicate that special educators' professional roles are conceived and enacted in the context of complex activity systems. These roles are fostered not by the regulations (such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) that are assumed to govern special educators' practice, but, typically, by the knowledge and beliefs of the special educator and surrounding school community members, the social and materials resources available in a particular school context, and the formal and informal rules that delineate their work and determine which objective, among many, should be prioritized. We end with a discussion of role as a core feature of models of special education teaching quality and consider how research, policy, and practice can be leveraged to support and sustain effective teaching practice for students with disabilities.

Extended summary (1000 words, excluding reference list) Include introduction, theoretical background, methods, aims, preliminary findings/findings, results, theoretical and education significance, relevance to the QUINT ambition and the reference list.

Introduction

Historically, special education teachers' (SETs) work has been characterized by role conflict, overload, and ambiguity (Bettini et al., 2021). This shapes their engagement in and commitment to teaching (e.g., Gersten et al., 2001), and the quality of instruction provided to students with disabilities. Though role problems are well-documented (Billingsley et al., 2020), to our knowledge no analysis has synthesized the extensive literature regarding how schools construct special educators' roles.

Theoretical Background

SETs' work is complex, and policy emphasizes their roles should be defined by the needs of the students with whom they work (IDEA, 2004, 34 CFR.300.39). Importantly, though they work alongside general educators, SETs' work is distinct. First, they are required to design individualized programming to meet students' complex needs, across settings and grade levels (Brownell et al., 2010). Second, SETs do not always provide direct services; they often work indirectly with students by coordinating and supporting others (e.g., paraprofessionals, general educators) who provide instruction (Jones et al., 2019). Third, SETs are often the only professional fulfilling their role in their school, resulting in professional isolation (Brunsting et al., 2014). Though we know SETs experience pervasive

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role problems (Billingsley et al., 2020), we know little about how their roles are constructed in schools, and the implications of that for teaching quality.

We ground this study in cultural historical activity theory (CHAT, Cole & Engeström, 1993), a tool for understanding how relationships within complex social systems might shape role. The unit of analysis in CHAT is an activity system oriented toward a particular *object* (e.g., provision of special education). These include the *subject* (actor/learner), *object* (desired outcome), *community* (network of others who share the object), *rules* (norms/policies regulating behavior), *division of labor* (distribution of tasks, power, responsibilities), and *tools* (resources used to pursue the object). These elements are dialectically related, with each element shaping/influencing the others.

Aims

- Report findings from a systematic review of research regarding how SETs' roles are constructed
- Consider role conceptions as the core of attempts to define, measure, and support high quality teaching for students with disabilities
- Propose how to promote clear role conceptions and improve teaching quality in special education

Methods

Search and Inclusion Procedures

We followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Moher et al., 2009) guidelines for identification, screening, and inclusion in systematic reviews. We included studies that explored conceptions and enactment of SETs' roles, within the special education activity system. Included studies (n = 67) were peer reviewed; published between 1997 and 2020 in the United States; and focused on conceptions and enactment of SETs' roles in kindergarten through 12th grade settings. Of note, though we limited to the United States, internationally, SETs experience similar role problems (e.g., Klang et al., 2016; Lavian, 2015). Given the multi-dimensional nature of SETs' work, we included studies that addressed academic, social/emotional/behavioral, collaborative, managerial, and compliance roles.

Data Analysis

First, we developed annotations for each included study to distill the information included in published research reports (e.g., sample, findings). Next, pairs of researchers coded each annotation for CHAT elements (e.g., rules; Cole & Engeström, 1993) and developed an analytic memo describing what we learned about the *subjects*, *objects*, and *outcomes* of the activity systems; exploring the contextual elements at play (i.e., *rules*, *tools*, *division of labor*, and *community*) and their relationship to one another; and summarizing how CHAT elements interacted with and shaped one another. Then, we reviewed our analytic summaries, working iteratively within and across CHAT elements. Finally, we brought assertions to team meetings where we interrogated each assertion by questioning, probing, and reviewing data to ensure robust findings.

Preliminary Findings

Our analysis reveals that special educators' roles are conceived and enacted in the context of complex activity systems. Over time, little has been done to abate SETs' role problems. SETs are taking up many roles and struggling to fulfill them all (e.g., Bettini et al., 2015). Additionally, across studies there was no clear consensus regarding the object (aim) of special education. Objects emerged when individuals had to negotiate competing demands

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(e.g., Youngs et al., 2011) or in purposeful efforts to make progress toward a shared object based on one aspect of SETs' roles (e.g., collaborator). Subjects' (e.g., SETs, principals) beliefs about students with disabilities and the purpose/function of special education actively shape their roles, including the ways they engage in and negotiate division of labor, the tools they use to fulfill their role, and the community with which they engage to support students (e.g., Ruppert et al., 2018). Importantly, SETs' roles are interdependent with others, requiring trust, shared understandings, and collaborative opportunities (e.g., Klingner & Vaughn, 2001). These relationships are forged in community and prompt SETs to make decisions regarding to whom and for what they feel accountable (e.g., Braun & Youngs, 2020). This was particularly salient when rules were considered, as special educators' capacity to enact their beliefs regarding their role was formed/constrained by rules, and how rules organized the tools (e.g., curricula, instructional time) and the community (e.g., paraprofessionals) to provide special education services (e.g., Narayan, 2011; Stelitano et al., 2020).

Theoretical and Educational Significance

Though decades of research describe the role problems special educators' encounter (Billingsley et al., 2020), we have failed to establish a clear vision of what it means to be a special educator and how to support that work in practice. Our findings suggest that when leaders fail to explicitly answer the question "What is special about special education?", school communities make their own answer, often constrained by their knowledge and beliefs, available tools, and rules that others place on them. Instead of roles being proactively designed to work toward a shared object, the interaction between elements produces roles, with implications for how we measure teaching quality, and support teachers' professional learning.

Relevance to QUINT Ambition

By connecting role conceptions and enactment, this presentation directly addresses QUINT's dedication to understanding the ways of conceptualizing teaching quality, the theoretical assumptions that stakeholders bring to special education, and how these shape teaching quality.

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