

“From Teacher Preparation to Classroom Reality: Novice Special Education Teachers’ Retrospective Perspectives on Mentoring and Professional Support”

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ABSTRACT:

Early career teachers often encounter significant professional and emotional challenges during the transition from teacher education to practice, particularly in special education. This qualitative retrospective study examines how novice special education teachers interpret their early professional experiences, focusing on mentoring and institutional support. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten teachers in their first three years of practice and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Findings indicate that participants felt well prepared pedagogically but experienced difficulties in classroom management, parent communication, and integration into school culture. Many described feelings of professional isolation, especially during their initial year. Although formal mentoring structures were available, their effectiveness varied depending on contextual and relational factors. Informal collegial relationships and supportive leadership emerged as critical sources of support. The study highlights the importance of context-sensitive, relationally grounded mentoring and the need to strengthen support systems for novice teachers in special education.

Keywords: novice teachers; teacher induction; mentoring; teacher retention; professional identity

Introduction

Early career teachers frequently encounter substantial professional, organizational, and emotional challenges during their transition from teacher education to professional practice. This transition has become a central focus of research and public discourse, particularly in light of rapid social, technological, and institutional changes that continuously reshape educational systems worldwide (Sheridan et al., 2022; Kelchtermans, 2022). The early stages of teaching are widely recognized as a critical period during which teachers construct their professional identities,

establish instructional practices, and develop a long-term commitment to the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2008; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2007). This phase is often characterized by what has been described as “reality shock,” reflecting the gap between expectations formed during teacher education and the complexities of classroom practice (Veenman, 1984; Flores, 2006). The decisions and experiences that unfold during this formative period carry enduring consequences not only for individual teachers but also for the students they serve and the institutions they join. Teacher shortages have become a global concern

across educational systems, underscoring the need to better understand the factors shaping novice teachers' early career experiences. Such understanding is essential for designing context-sensitive support and resilience-building frameworks that can sustain teachers' professional development and retention (Ingersoll et al., 2008; Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

The complexity of this transition is especially pronounced in special education. Teachers entering this field work with students with diverse and complex learning needs, collaborate within multidisciplinary teams, and engage intensively with families and external professionals. These compounding demands contribute to the well-documented phenomenon of high attrition rates among special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2009; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Bettini et al., 2020). Understanding how novice teachers experience the transition into special education is therefore essential for improving teacher preparation, induction structures, and long-term retention.

Teacher education programs aim to prepare prospective teachers both academically and professionally. A central component of these programs is the practicum, or clinical training experience, which is widely considered essential for bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom reality (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Grossman et al., 2008; Zeichner, 2020). During practicum placements, student teachers engage in lesson planning, classroom instruction, and participation in the everyday routines of school life. However, despite the recognized importance of practice-based preparation, research consistently indicates that novice teachers often experience a significant discontinuity between their training and the realities of professional practice (Flores, 2006).

Mentoring is widely recognized as a central mechanism of support for novice teachers during their entry into the profession. Effective mentoring has been shown to promote instructional competence, professional confidence, and a sense of belonging within the school community (Hobson et al., 2009).

However, the effectiveness of mentoring varies considerably depending on contextual and relational factors, including mentor expertise, availability, and alignment with the novice teacher's professional context (Allen et al., 2007; Kutsyruba et al., 2009). Recent research further emphasizes the role of teacher vulnerability and identity negotiation in shaping early career experiences, suggesting that novice teachers may avoid seeking support when it is perceived as a threat to their professional competence (Kelchtermans, 2022).

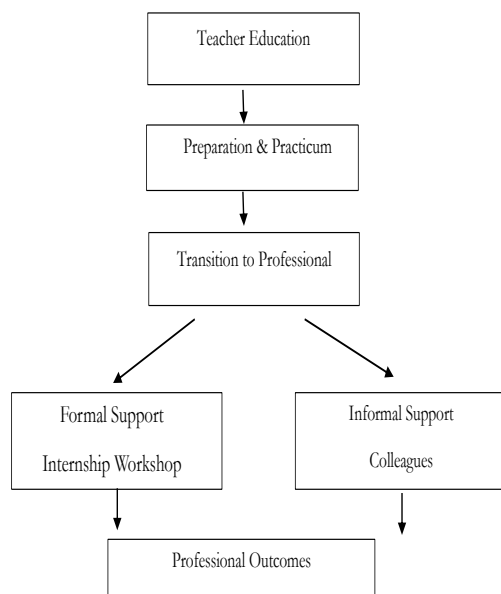
Despite the existence of formal support structures, novice teachers frequently report feelings of professional isolation, particularly in the early stages of their careers (Schuck et al., 2008). These challenges are especially acute in special education, where the emotional and relational demands of teaching are intensified. While previous research has extensively examined teacher induction and mentoring, relatively limited attention has been given to how novice teachers retrospectively interpret their early professional experiences and the meanings they attribute to different forms of support (Conway, 2005).

This study contributes to the field of teacher education by advancing a relational and context-sensitive understanding of teacher induction. While existing research has extensively documented the challenges faced by novice teachers, the present study offers a retrospective perspective that captures how early professional experiences are reinterpreted over time, thereby deepening insight into processes of professional meaning-making. By focusing specifically on special education, the study extends the literature beyond general teacher education contexts, highlighting how the complexity of diverse student needs and the relational demands of the field shape the nature of induction and support. Furthermore, drawing on the framework of Communities of Practice, the findings illuminate the central role of relational dynamics in shaping novice teachers' integration into school communities, demonstrating that access to meaningful participation is mediated less by formal structures than by the quality of informal

collegial interactions and leadership practices. In doing so, the study reconceptualizes teacher induction as a socially embedded process in which belonging, recognition, and relational support are fundamental to professional development and retention.

Figure

Conceptual framework of support systems influencing novice teachers during the transition from teacher education to professional practice.



2. Methodology

Participants/Sample: This qualitative study involved ten novice teachers working in the field of special education during their first three years of professional teaching. Participants were purposively selected on the basis of their prior involvement in an earlier study conducted during their teacher education program, in which reflective journals written by second and third-year student teachers were examined (Shavit & Moshe, 2019). The present study revisited these participants in order to explore their retrospective interpretations of the transition from teacher education to professional practice. This design enabled a longitudinal perspective on participants' professional

development, connecting their reflections during training with their subsequent experiences in the field. The previous study examined the development of reflective thinking among pre-service teachers during their training, focusing on how reflective processes supported their emerging professional understanding. Building on this earlier phase, the present study enables a retrospective linkage between pre-service experiences and early career interpretations, allowing for a deeper understanding of how meanings constructed during teacher education are reinterpreted in light of real-world teaching contexts. By connecting these two stages, the study provides a more nuanced account of professional development across the transition from preparation to practice.

It is acknowledged that recruiting participants from a prior study introduces a potential source of selection bias, as the sample does not represent the full population of novice special education teachers. All participants were trained within the same teacher education institution and were previously known to the researchers. This limitation is addressed in the Limitations section and is taken into account in interpreting the transferability of the findings.

At the time of the interviews, participants were employed in a range of educational settings, including special education classrooms, integration roles within mainstream schools, and homeroom teaching positions. Their diverse professional contexts ensured that the study captured a range of experiences within the Israeli special education system.

Although the sample size is relatively small, it is consistent with the conventions of qualitative research designs that prioritize depth of understanding over breadth of representation. A sample of ten participants is considered appropriate for generating rich,

in-depth data in studies of this kind (Creswell & Poth, 2008; Guest et al., 2006).

Instruments: Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to explore participants' experiences during their transition from teacher education to professional practice. The semi-structured format was selected because it allows participants to describe their experiences in their own words and at a level of depth suited to their individual circumstances, while also enabling the researchers to address the specific topics central to the study's research questions.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately one hour each. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The use of video-based interviews facilitated data collection while maintaining the interpersonal quality of the interview interaction.

The interview protocol comprised five open-ended questions designed to elicit retrospective reflection on participants' early professional experiences. The retrospective design of the study is premised on the understanding that temporal distance from formative professional experiences allows participants to reinterpret and reconstruct those experiences from a more developed professional standpoint (Conway, 2005). This approach provides access to the meanings that teachers attribute to their early career experiences rather than merely to their immediate reactions.

The interview questions addressed the following dimensions of participants' professional experiences: the nature of the transition from teacher education to school-based practice; the support received through formal mentoring structures; informal sources of support within the school environment; and the professional and emotional challenges encountered during the first years of teaching. Participants were

encouraged to elaborate on their responses and to provide concrete examples that illustrated both the practical and emotional dimensions of their early career experiences.

Procedure: The interview transcripts were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000), conducted in several iterative stages in order to identify patterns and themes relevant to the research questions.

In the first stage, all transcripts were read repeatedly in their entirety to develop a holistic understanding of each participant's narrative. In the second stage, meaningful units of text pertaining to the research questions were identified and organized into preliminary analytical categories.

The analysis combined deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive component was guided by the study's theoretical and conceptual framework, which focused on the role of mentoring, support systems, and professional socialization during the transition into teaching. The inductive component allowed additional themes and subthemes to emerge organically from the participants' narratives, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Open coding was employed to identify recurring themes and conceptual relationships within the data. This process enabled the researchers to organize participants' accounts into broader thematic categories representing shared experiences and patterns across the sample.

The unit of analysis was the individual teacher rather than the discrete statement. Accordingly, the frequencies reported in the Findings section reflect the number of participants who addressed a given theme, rather than the total number of statements associated with that theme.

Data Analysis: Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba,

985). To strengthen credibility, both researchers independently reviewed the interview transcripts and developed initial coding categories without prior consultation. The researchers then compared their analytical interpretations systematically, identifying areas of agreement and discrepancy.

Where discrepancies arose, the researchers engaged in sustained discussion until consensus was reached through a process of negotiated agreement. This approach to analyst triangulation — in which two independent coders develop and reconcile their interpretations — is an established strategy for enhancing the credibility of qualitative content analysis in the absence of quantitative reliability coefficients (Creswell & Poth, 2008; Saldaña, 2020). The iterative nature of this process helped ensure that the final thematic categories accurately reflected the range and depth of participants' experiences.

Member checking was not formally conducted; however, participants had the opportunity to elaborate freely during the interviews, and the researchers returned to the transcripts at multiple analytical stages to verify that interpretations remained anchored in participants' own accounts.

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Ethical Considerations: The study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of the authors' academic institution. All participants received a written information sheet describing the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interviews. To protect participant confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts and pseudonyms were assigned to both participants and their schools. All interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely on a password-protected institutional server and were accessible only to the research team.

3. Results

Analysis of the interviews revealed three central themes characterizing novice teachers' experiences during their transition from teacher education to professional practice: (1) perceived preparedness and gaps in training, (2) emotional experiences during the transition to teaching, and (3) sources of professional and personal support during the early years of teaching. Each theme is presented below, illustrated with representative excerpts from the interview data. Consistent with

the Communities of Practice framework (Lave & Wenger, 99), the findings are interpreted in terms of participants' evolving participation within — and, in some cases, exclusion from — the professional communities of their schools.

Theme : Perceived Preparedness and Gaps in Training

All ten participants reported that their teacher education program had equipped them with solid pedagogical knowledge. Retrospectively, they described feeling confident in their didactic preparation and in the professional guidance they had received from pedagogical instructors during their training. This confidence was particularly evident in relation to lesson planning and instructional design, areas in which the practicum appeared to provide meaningful and transferable preparation.

Several participants emphasized that the tools acquired during training remained relevant once they entered the profession. Inbal reflected:

"I had pedagogical tools. I felt strengthened by what I had learned during the lesson planning experience, especially because there was no guidance during the internship."

Similarly, Rotem noted:

"When I left the training program, I had practical tools for planning and building lessons. That knowledge stayed with me, so I need less didactic support."

Participants frequently contrasted the supportive environment of teacher education with the professional reality they encountered upon entering the school system. Drawing on the Communities of Practice framework, this contrast can be understood as the transition from a structured, scaffolded community — in which participation is actively supported — to a new professional community in which full participation is expected without an equivalent scaffolding structure. Inbar captured this shift metaphorically:

"During the studies we were guided and supported all the time, but the internship felt like

diving into the pool... suddenly there is no college."

Despite their confidence in didactic preparation, participants identified two areas in which they felt substantially underprepared. The most frequently cited gap concerned classroom management. Eight of the ten participants described this as a significant challenge during their first years of teaching. Aviva explained:

"I lacked tools for classroom management and for standing in front of a whole class because most of my practicum experience in special education involved working individually with a single student."

This finding points to a structural limitation of practicum experiences in special education, where one-to-one or small-group instruction may dominate student teachers' practical training, leaving them with limited exposure to whole-class dynamics.

The second area of reported unpreparedness concerned communication with parents and families — a dimension of professional practice that is especially demanding in special education. Moran stated directly:

"Parents – I was not trained for that."

Gili elaborated on the anxiety this generated:

"I was very afraid of the parents. Whenever they approached me, I felt that I didn't know how to deal with them."

These accounts suggest that while teacher education programs may provide strong preparation in the pedagogical and didactic dimensions of teaching, significant gaps remain in preparing novice teachers for the relational, communicative, and organizational demands of professional practice — precisely the dimensions most central to full membership in the school's community of practice.

Theme 2: Emotional Experiences During the Transition to Teaching

A prominent theme across the interviews was the intense emotional dimension of the transition from teacher education to professional teaching.

Nine of the ten participants described feelings of loneliness and professional isolation during their first years in the profession. These experiences were particularly acute during the initial months of employment, when participants faced full professional responsibility for the first time without the peer cohort and institutional support structures that had characterized their training.

From the perspective of Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 99; Wenger, 1998), these feelings of isolation can be understood as an expression of peripheral or marginal participation — a condition in which the novice teacher has not yet been meaningfully integrated into the social and professional fabric of the school community. Bar described this experience directly:

"The main difficulty was loneliness and being alone with the class, without help. I ended up in a school where I really felt alone."

Rotem offered a particularly vivid account of the embodied quality of this isolation:

"I remember sitting on the soccer field with the yellow vest during recess and feeling so alone. The kids threw the ball at me and I didn't know what to do. My mental state was really bad. I felt invisible when I came to school in the morning."

The emotional weight of these experiences was substantial. For several participants, the cumulative burden of professional isolation and inadequate support led to serious doubts about remaining in the profession. Aviva described her first year of teaching:

"I was emotionally overloaded. At the end of the year I told the principal that I had no one to turn to. I felt like I had been thrown into the deep end and mostly drowned. By the end of the year I was exhausted and even considered leaving."

Participants frequently referenced the contrast between the emotional support available during teacher education and the relative absence of such support in their early professional years. This comparison underscores the importance of the relational structures characteristic of the training community. Yael reflected:

"I wouldn't have been able to get through that year if I hadn't had the support of the training teacher and the pedagogical instructor during my studies."

These accounts collectively highlight the emotional cost of transitioning from a community that actively scaffolds participation to a professional environment in which belonging must be negotiated independently and is by no means guaranteed. The findings are consistent with prior research documenting the prevalence of professional isolation among novice teachers (Schuck et al., 2008; Dussault et al., 1999) and underscore the particular vulnerability of early career teachers in special education.

Theme 3: Sources of Support During the Early Years of Teaching

The analysis revealed four distinct sources of support that shaped participants' professional experiences during their early career years: formal mentoring structures, informal collegial relationships, school leadership, and family support. Importantly, the effectiveness of these sources varied considerably across participants and institutional contexts, reflecting the extent to which novice teachers were able to access meaningful forms of community membership and professional brokerage (Wenger, 1998).

Formal Support

Formal support for novice teachers in the Israeli education system is provided through institutional structures including internship workshops and assigned mentor teachers. Seven participants described these frameworks as present but inconsistent in their practical value, often failing to address the specific professional challenges they encountered.

A recurring concern was the mismatch between the mentor's professional background and the novice teacher's specialized context. Inbar explained:

"It was strange because there were two parallel things: the workshop at the college and the mentor teacher at the school. The mentor teacher

wasn't from special education, and sometimes I felt I actually had more knowledge."

She also described the internship workshop as insufficiently individualized:

"It was a large Zoom group and there was nothing personal about it. It felt like something that had simply been placed on my schedule."

Yoram similarly reported that his assigned mentor was unable to provide the support he needed:

"The mentor didn't have time for me or for the issues that concerned me, so I felt I had no one to turn to."

These accounts suggest that formal mentoring structures, while structurally present, frequently failed to function as effective mechanisms of professional brokerage. Within a Communities of Practice framework, this reflects a failure of the brokering function — the mentor was either insufficiently embedded in the relevant professional community (special education) or lacked the availability and motivation to facilitate the novice teacher's integration into the school community.

When formal mentoring relationships were substantive, however, participants described them as highly valuable. After transitioning to a different school, Yoram reported a markedly different experience:

"I constantly received constructive feedback from a teacher who showed me how to do things properly."

This contrast highlights that the effectiveness of formal mentoring is not determined by its structural existence alone, but by the relational and contextual conditions in which it is enacted.

Informal Support

In the majority of cases, informal collegial relationships emerged as the most meaningful source of professional support. These relationships — typically with experienced colleagues who were not formally assigned as mentors — provided the guidance, modeling, and emotional sustenance that formal structures

failed to offer. Aviva described the significance of one such relationship:

"During my internship there was an amazing teacher who supported me. It wasn't formal mentoring, but whenever I needed advice I could call her."

Inbar described how an experienced colleague helped her navigate one of the areas in which she had felt most underprepared:

"The lead teacher I worked with gave me the main support. She helped me understand how to conduct respectful conversations with parents, which was something I hadn't been trained for."

From the perspective of Communities of Practice, these informal relationships exemplify effective brokerage: experienced practitioners who facilitate the novice teacher's access to the community's shared practices, norms, and relational repertoires. The fact that this brokerage emerged informally rather than through formal assignment suggests that the conditions enabling legitimate peripheral participation were more reliably created through organic relational structures than through institutionally designated roles.

Not all participants, however, had access to supportive informal networks. Bar described a contrasting experience:

"The staff was older and didn't really relate to the new teacher who had joined."

This account illustrates how school culture and collegial dynamics can constitute barriers to community membership, effectively impeding the novice teacher's participation in the professional community of the school.

The Role of the School Principal

School principals emerged as a significant, though often overlooked, factor in shaping novice teachers' professional experiences. Participants described strikingly different experiences depending on the degree of visibility and responsiveness demonstrated by their principals.

Bar offered a particularly evocative account of how a principal's lack of basic acknowledgment had contributed to her decision to leave:

"When I decided to leave in the middle of the year, the principal asked what she could have done better. I told her that even saying 'good morning' to me every day could have changed my whole experience."

This testimony underscores the degree to which even minimal acts of recognition by institutional leaders can influence novice teachers' sense of belonging and professional continuity. In contrast, Yoram described an experience of active, constructive engagement from his principal in a different school:

"The principal observed my lesson and gave constructive feedback. When she saw that I had implemented her suggestions in the next lesson, she encouraged me and gave additional ideas."

These contrasting experiences highlight the pivotal role of school leadership in either facilitating or impeding novice teachers' integration into the school's professional community. The principal, in this sense, functions as a gatekeeper of community membership — determining, through both action and inaction, the degree to which the novice teacher is recognized as a legitimate participant in the professional life of the school.

Family Support

Finally, several participants identified family members as an important source of emotional support during their early professional years, particularly during periods of acute stress. Aviva reflected:

"At home my husband, my parents and my friends experienced the emotional rollercoaster of the internship year together with me."

Inbar similarly described the role of family as a stabilizing presence:

"I shared all my difficulties at home and my family tried to lift my spirits."

While family support does not constitute a professional resource in the institutional sense, it

appeared to serve a compensatory emotional function, providing participants with a relational buffer against the isolation and stress of their early professional experiences. This finding is consistent with research highlighting the broader ecological context of novice teacher wellbeing (Sheridan et al., 2022) and underscores the importance of attending to the personal as well as professional dimensions of early career support.

Taken together, the three themes emerging from the analysis reveal a consistent pattern: novice special education teachers enter the profession with meaningful pedagogical preparation but encounter substantial challenges in the relational, emotional, and organizational dimensions of professional practice. The degree to which these challenges are navigated successfully appears to depend less on the formal structures in place than on the quality of relational support — whether from mentors, colleagues, principals, or family — available to the novice teacher during the critical early years of professional practice.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how novice special education teachers retrospectively interpret their transition from teacher education to professional practice, with particular attention to the role of mentoring and institutional support during the early career years. The findings are discussed below in relation to the existing literature and to the theoretical framework of Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 99; Wenger, 998), which informed the study's analytical orientation.

Pedagogical Preparedness and Its Limits

The findings indicate that participants entered the profession with a strong sense of pedagogical preparedness. They described their teacher education programs as having equipped them with practical tools for lesson planning and instructional design, and they retrospectively valued the guidance of pedagogical instructors and cooperating teachers during their practicum experiences. These findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating that well-structured clinical training plays a significant role in the

development of professional competence (Darling-Hammond et al., 207; Grossman et al., 208) and align with earlier work by the present authors on the role of reflective practice in teacher preparation (Author & Author, 209).

Within the Communities of Practice framework, this phase of preparation can be understood as a period of supported peripheral participation: student teachers were legitimately integrated into a scaffolded professional community in which mentoring was structured, feedback was continuous, and the boundaries of expected participation were clearly defined (Lave & Wenger, 99). The contrast that participants drew between this environment and the relative absence of structured support upon entering the profession reflects the discontinuity inherent in the transition between communities — from the training institution to the school.

Despite this confidence, two areas of substantial unpreparedness emerged consistently: classroom management and communication with parents. These findings are consistent with a body of literature indicating that teacher preparation programs frequently underemphasize the interpersonal and organizational dimensions of teaching in favor of didactic and curriculum-focused content (Johnson et al., 2005; Kraft & Rogers, 205). In the context of special education, where family collaboration is a central professional responsibility and whole-class dynamics are qualitatively different from those encountered during one-to-one practicum supervision, these gaps appear particularly consequential.

The Emotional Dimension of Professional Entry

A prominent and cross-cutting finding was the intensity of the emotional challenges associated with the transition into professional teaching. The majority of participants described feelings of loneliness, professional isolation, and emotional overload during their first years in the profession — experiences that, for some, gave rise to serious consideration of leaving the field. These findings extend a well-established body of research documenting the emotional vulnerability of novice teachers during the induction period

(Dussault et al., 999; Schuck et al., 208) and underscore the particular severity of these challenges in special education (Billingsley & Bettini, 209).

The Communities of Practice framework provides a productive lens through which to interpret these emotional experiences. Participants' accounts of feeling invisible, unsupported, and disconnected from their school communities can be understood as expressions of failed or impeded peripheral participation — conditions in which the newcomer is structurally present within the institution but lacks meaningful access to the relational and professional resources of the community (Wenger, 998). In several cases, this exclusion was not deliberate but emerged from the absence of active facilitation: no one assumed the role of broker, and as a result, the novice teacher remained at the margins of community life. This dynamic may be particularly pronounced in special education contexts, where novice teachers often work in small, specialized settings or with individual students and may constitute a relatively small subgroup within the broader school staff. This structural positioning can limit their access to shared professional spaces and informal collegial interactions, thereby intensifying their marginal participation and reinforcing experiences of isolation.

These findings reinforce the argument that the transition from teacher education to professional teaching constitutes a significant discontinuity in the structure of professional participation. The move from a community defined by scaffolded support and shared peer experience to one characterized by individual responsibility and uncertain belonging represents a challenge that formal induction structures, as currently designed, appear insufficiently equipped to address.

Formal and Informal Support: A Persistent Tension

One of the most consistent and theoretically significant findings of this study concerns the relationship between formal and informal sources of professional support. While formal mentoring

structures were present for most participants, their effectiveness was highly variable and frequently limited by factors including mentor unavailability, mismatches between the mentor's professional background and the novice teacher's specialized context, and the impersonal character of large-group induction workshops. These findings corroborate prior research indicating that the structural existence of mentoring programs does not reliably translate into effective mentoring relationships (Kutsyruba et al., 2019; Hobson et al., 2009).

In contrast, informal collegial relationships — with experienced teachers who were not formally assigned as mentors — consistently emerged as the most meaningful and practically effective sources of professional support. These relationships provided the modeling, guidance, and relational attunement that formal structures failed to offer. From the perspective of Communities of Practice, this finding reflects the importance of brokerage: experienced community members who facilitate the novice's access to shared practices, norms, and professional knowledge (Wenger, 1998). The fact that this brokerage emerged informally — through relationships of proximity, trust, and shared professional interest rather than institutional designation — suggests that current formal mentoring arrangements may not reliably generate the conditions under which effective brokerage can occur.

The quality of mentoring relationships also appeared to depend on the mentor's motivation, availability, and familiarity with the novice teacher's specific professional context. This is consistent with prior research emphasizing the importance of mentor preparation and subject-area alignment in supporting effective induction (Allen et al., 2007; Daly & Milton, 2007). In special education specifically, the assignment of mentors without specialist knowledge in the field appears to have undermined the potential value of the mentoring relationship for several participants.

The Role of School Leadership and Institutional Culture

The findings highlight the pivotal role of school principals and institutional culture in shaping novice teachers' professional experiences. Participants described strikingly different trajectories depending on the degree to which their principals actively acknowledged, supported, and engaged with them as new members of the school community. In some cases, minimal acts of recognition — a daily greeting, an observed lesson followed by constructive feedback — appeared to have a disproportionate impact on participants' sense of belonging and professional confidence. In other cases, the absence of such recognition contributed directly to teachers' decisions to leave their schools or the profession.

These findings extend prior research on the role of school climate and leadership in novice teacher retention (Ingersoll et al., 2008) and align with theoretical accounts of the principal as a gatekeeper of community membership. Within the Communities of Practice framework, the principal's role can be understood as determining the institutional conditions under which legitimate peripheral participation is possible including whether the school's culture actively welcomes newcomers or passively excludes them through indifference or structural neglect.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that the professional adjustment of novice special education teachers is shaped less by the formal structures nominally in place than by the relational quality of the communities they enter. Teacher preparation, mentoring, and leadership each contribute to the conditions of professional participation — but their effectiveness depends on the degree to which they generate genuine opportunities for belonging, guidance, and growth.

At its core, what shapes novice teachers' trajectories is not simply what support is available, but whether they feel seen, guided, and included as they take their first steps into the profession.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how novice special education teachers retrospectively interpreted their transition from teacher preparation to professional practice, with a focus on the role of mentoring and support in shaping their early career experiences. Drawing on the Communities of Practice framework, the study offers three central contributions to the existing literature.

First, it demonstrates that while teacher education programs are effective in developing pedagogical competence, they leave significant gaps in preparing novice teachers for the relational, communicative, and organizational demands of professional practice — areas that are particularly consequential in special education. Second, it reveals that formal mentoring structures, as currently designed and implemented, often fail to provide the quality of professional brokerage that novice teachers require during the critical induction period. Third, it highlights the extent to which novice teachers' professional adjustment depends on informal relational support — from colleagues, principals, and family — that operates largely outside formal institutional frameworks.

These findings carry implications for the design of teacher education programs, mentoring systems, and school induction practices. Specifically, they suggest the need for greater emphasis on relational and organizational competencies in pre-service training; for mentoring arrangements that prioritize specialist alignment, relational quality, and mentor preparation; and for school cultures that actively facilitate the integration of new teachers into the professional community.

These insights are particularly critical in special education contexts, where novice teachers often operate within small, specialized settings and may constitute a marginal subgroup within the school staff. This structural positioning can restrict their access to shared professional spaces, intensify their marginal participation, and heighten their sense of isolation during the transition into practice, underscoring the need for targeted institutional policies and school-level practices

that actively facilitate their inclusion and professional integration.

Future Research

Further research is needed to deepen understanding of the conditions under which formal and informal support structures effectively facilitate novice teachers' professional adjustment. Future studies might examine the specific characteristics of mentoring relationships that predict successful induction outcomes in special education — including the role of specialist alignment, relational trust, and institutional support for mentors themselves.

Longitudinal research designs would be particularly valuable in this regard. Following teachers from the final stages of pre-service preparation through the internship year and into established professional practice would enable researchers to track the development of professional identity, resilience, and community membership over time, and to identify the conditions that support or undermine sustained commitment to the profession.

Future studies might also explore the perspectives of mentors, principals, and school communities themselves, in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the relational and institutional dynamics that shape novice teachers' early career trajectories. Comparative research across different national contexts and educational systems would further contribute to understanding the generalizability of the present findings.

Practical Recommendations

The findings of this study point to several concrete directions for improving support systems for novice special education teachers. First, teacher education programs should expand their focus beyond pedagogical and didactic preparation to include structured opportunities for developing competencies in classroom management under whole-class conditions, parent communication, and organizational navigation. These areas emerged consistently as the most significant gaps in participants'

preparation and are amenable to targeted curriculum development and practicum design.

Second, formal mentoring systems should be restructured to prioritize specialist alignment, mentor preparation, and relational quality over structural compliance. The assignment of mentors without relevant specialist knowledge in special education appears to undermine the potential value of the mentoring relationship. Providing mentors with dedicated training in the interpersonal and emotional dimensions of the mentoring role — not only in its pedagogical dimensions — may substantially improve the quality of induction support available to novice teachers (Allen et al., 207; Shavit, 209).

Third, the potential of external mentoring arrangements — in which experienced educators from outside the novice teacher's school provide a more neutral and reflective professional space — warrants further development and empirical evaluation (Ewing, 202). Such arrangements may be particularly beneficial in contexts where school culture is not conducive to informal collegial support.

Finally, school principals and institutional leaders should be supported in understanding their role as active facilitators of novice teachers' integration into the professional community. Even modest acts of recognition, observation, and feedback appear to have a significant impact on novice teachers' sense of belonging and commitment to the profession.

Limitations

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged in interpreting its findings. First, the study is based on a purposive sample of ten novice teachers, all of whom were previously known to the researchers through their participation in an earlier study (Author & Author, 209). While this design enabled a longitudinal perspective on participants' professional development, it also introduces the possibility of selection bias: participants who maintained contact with the research team and agreed to be re-interviewed may differ systematically from those who did not, potentially

in terms of professional resilience, institutional integration, or attitudes toward reflective practice. The findings should therefore be interpreted with caution with respect to their transferability to the broader population of novice special education teachers.

Second, the study relied on retrospective accounts of participants' early professional experiences, collected at a temporal remove from the events described. While retrospective inquiry offers the advantage of reflective distance and enables participants to reinterpret formative experiences from a more developed professional perspective (Conway, 2005), it is also subject to the well-documented limitations of autobiographical memory, including selective recall, post-hoc rationalization, and the influence of subsequent professional experiences on the reconstruction of earlier ones. These limitations are inherent to retrospective research designs and are not fully resolvable, though they are acknowledged here as a necessary constraint on the interpretive claims of the study.

Third, all participants were trained within the same teacher education institution and worked within a single national education system. The structural and organizational characteristics of the Israeli education system — including its specific induction framework, mentoring regulations, and special education policy context — shape the conditions under which the experiences described in this study occurred. The findings should therefore be understood as contextually situated, and their applicability to other national or institutional contexts requires further empirical examination.

Despite these limitations, the study provides meaningful and theoretically grounded insights into the experiences of novice special education teachers during the critical transition into professional practice. By attending to the relational and institutional dimensions of this transition — and by situating participants' experiences within the framework of Communities of Practice — the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which early career teachers can

be effectively supported, retained, and enabled to grow.

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