

RESEARCH

The Value of Mentorship in Special Education Programs

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Abstract

This study investigates the critical role of mentorship in preparing pre-service special education teachers for the challenges of the classroom. We surveyed pre-service special education teachers before and after engaging in a year-long mentorship experience with a veteran teacher. We also followed up with study participants one year after the mentorship experience ended, during their first year of teaching, to examine longer-term perceptions of mentorship. Findings indicate that participants reported increased readiness in instructional practice, classroom management, and confidence in their teaching abilities. However, participants reported ongoing gaps in preparation, particularly related to case management and working with students from diverse backgrounds. Implications for educator preparation programs and future research are discussed.

Keywords: special education, educator preparation, teacher preparation, mentorship

The persistent shortage of special education teachers in K–12 schools has become a critical challenge for education systems across the United States. According to recent national analyses, more than 411,000 teaching positions across the United States are either unfilled or staffed by teachers who are not fully certified, representing approximately one in eight teaching positions nationwide; shortages are most widespread and severe in special education (Learning Policy Institute, 2025). Although shortages in special education predate the COVID-19 pandemic (Boe et al., 2013; Peyton et al., 2021), the pandemic exacerbated these trends, accelerating attrition and deepening reliance on underprepared or provisionally credentialed educators (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2023).

At the same time, enrollment in educator preparation programs has declined across disciplines (Will, 2022), and growth in alternative certification pathways has not yielded enough fully prepared teachers to meet demand (King & Yin, 2022). These patterns pose particular concern for students with disabilities, whose educational outcomes are closely linked to teacher quality and preparation (Feng & Sass, 2017). As the number of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) continues to increase (Pendharkar, 2023),

schools face mounting difficulty in fulfilling IDEA's mandate that students with disabilities be taught by highly qualified, fully credentialed teachers.

Research has found that “proper preparation” in special education practices yields improved teaching performance (Nougaret et al., 2005; Sindelar et al., 2004). The term “proper preparation” is both vague and all-encompassing, yet it remains an apt way to describe the many elements needed to ensure that pre-service teachers receive the knowledge, training, and mentorship required to be successful in their first years in the classroom. These elements include not only content knowledge and pedagogical training, but also structured opportunities for guided practice and professional learning alongside experienced educators. Conceptualizing preparation in this way highlights the importance of examining how specific supports, such as mentorship, function within educator preparation programs to translate coursework and clinical experiences into effective classroom practice.

Research also consistently demonstrates that the quality of preparation special education teachers receive has meaningful implications for their instructional effectiveness, classroom management, and retention in the profession (Nougaret et al., 2005; Sindelar et al., 2004). One element of preparation that has received sustained attention in the literature is mentorship. Mentorship from experienced educators has been shown to support new and early-career special education teachers by strengthening instructional practice, professional confidence, and persistence in the field (Billingsley et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2013; Washburn et al., 2012). However, much of this research centers on induction programs (i.e., programs of support and guidance for new teachers, typically occurring in the first three years of working in the classroom) that occur after teachers have assumed full responsibility for their classrooms

(Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Comparatively less empirical work has examined the role of mentorship during the pre-service phase of teacher preparation, when candidates are still developing foundational skills and professional identities.

Existing studies suggest that mentorship embedded within educator preparation programs may offer distinct benefits. Pre-service teachers who receive structured mentoring report increased professional growth, improved instructional practices, and stronger engagement of students during mentored lessons (Ortogero et al., 2022). Integrated mentorship models that align coursework, clinical practice, and mentor support have also been proposed as promising approaches for strengthening teacher readiness prior to entry into the profession (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). Effective mentorship is typically characterized by individualized support from experienced teachers, frequent and purposeful interaction, non-evaluative feedback, and guidance that is responsive to the mentee's instructional and professional needs (Beck et al., 2020; Hobson et al., 2009). For special education candidates in particular, mentors provide critical emotional, procedural, curricular, and instructional support that may not be fully addressed through coursework alone (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007).

At the same time, research suggests that the effectiveness of mentorship during teacher preparation is shaped by contextual and structural factors. Pre-service teachers may have limited opportunities to engage deeply in inclusive instructional practices, receive feedback that lacks specificity or depth, or develop confidence in complex responsibilities such as case management and Individualized Education Program (IEP) development

(Clarke et al., 2014; Doran, 2020). Additional challenges related to mentor availability, mentor–mentee alignment, and the scope of support provided during clinical experiences may further influence how mentorship is experienced during preparation (McElwee et al., 2018; Parks et al., 2020). Together, these findings suggest that while mentorship is widely viewed as beneficial, its impact during teacher preparation may vary in important ways.

Within this context, notable gaps remain in the literature. Research on mentorship during teacher preparation is limited, particularly in special education, and few studies examine mentorship experiences longitudinally. Moreover, less is known about how mentorship supports candidates' readiness for complex aspects of special education practice, such as case management responsibilities and teaching students from diverse linguistic, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity backgrounds. These gaps are especially prominent in the post-COVID educational context, where new teachers are entering classrooms marked by heightened instructional demands, increased student diversity, and persistent staffing instability.

In their 2010 paper, Brownell et al. assert that special education research must respond to changes in the field. Responding to this call, the present study examines the role of mentorship in preparing pre-service special education teachers for the realities of classroom practice. Using a pre- and post-survey design, we investigated participants' perceptions of mentorship and readiness to teach following a year-long mentorship experience with veteran teachers. To better understand the longer-term influence of mentorship, we also surveyed participants one year after the mentorship experience concluded, during their first year as practicing special education teachers. The following research questions guided the

study:

1. How do special education pre-service teachers perceive mentorship after engaging in a mentorship experience?
2. How do special education pre-service teachers perceive their readiness to teach after engaging in a mentorship experience?
3. One year after the experience, do special education pre-service teachers feel their mentorship experience helped prepare them for the reality of being a special education teacher?

Method

Participants and Sampling

Special education pre-service teachers (hereafter referred to as participants) were recruited from a master's degree in teaching and credentialing program housed within a private university in Northern California. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, participants were required to (a) be enrolled in the program, (b) be pursuing a state-sponsored special education teaching credential in mild to moderate support needs (MMSN), extensive support needs (ESN), or dual credentials in both areas, (c) be classified as either a full-time student teacher or intern teacher at the time of the study, and (d) not hold another teaching credential.

Forty-eight students enrolled in the program were identified as potential participants. Of these, 41 completed the pre-survey, 26 completed the post-survey, and 12 completed the follow-up survey one year later. Because the analyses focused on changes in pre-service teachers' perceptions before and after the mentorship experience, only data from participants who completed both the pre- and post-surveys were included in the analytic sample ($n = 26$). Responses from both time points were matched using a self-

created unique participant identifier. Most participants identified as White and female, were between 31 and 40 years old, and were pursuing dual credentials in mild to moderate support needs and extensive support needs. Detailed demographic information for the analytic sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics (n = 26)

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Age		
22-30	8	31
31-40	11	42
41-50	5	19
51-60	2	8
Gender		
Male	9	35
Female	17	65
Race/Ethnicity		
White	12	46
Black/African American	2	8
Asian	1	4
Two or more races	2	8
Hispanic/Latino/a/x	9	35
Credential Type		
Mild/Moderate Support Needs	1	4
Extensive Support Needs	3	12
Dual (MMSN and ESN)	22	85

Mentorship Context and Design

For the purpose of this study, a mentor teacher was defined as an experienced educator who provides individualized support to the pre-service teacher (Hobson et al., 2009). Mentor teachers were selected by the university and, in accordance with state requirements, were fully credentialed in their content area with a minimum of three years of kindergarten through grade twelve teaching experience (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2017). A total of 22 mentor teachers

were assigned to support the 26 participants included in the analytic sample. Each participant was paired with one mentor teacher, although some mentors supported more than one participant.

Prior to the start of the mentorship experience, mentors received structured orientation and training designed to align mentor support with program expectations and state credentialing requirements. Training was provided across the study period and was informed by research on effective teacher mentorship, including practices related to observation protocols, feedback, professional communication, classroom management, collaboration, and evaluation of teacher readiness (Billingsley et al., 2019; Clarke et al., 2014; Garza et al., 2019; Gonser, 2022; Hunt et al., 2013; Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021; Ortogero et al., 2022). This training was intended to support mentors in providing consistent, high-quality guidance to pre-service teachers throughout the mentorship experience.

The mentorship experience occurred over one academic year, spanning two academic semesters. Mentors and participants were provided with a shared set of expectations for successful completion of the experience. These expectations included more than 400 hours of participants observing mentor teachers lead instruction while providing instructional support, more than 100 hours of participants leading instruction, and formal mentor feedback following a minimum of three teaching observations. Participants were also expected to receive at least five hours per week of additional individualized support from their mentor teachers. In addition, mentors supported participants in developing IEPs, observing IEP meetings, and, when feasible within the study timeframe, leading an IEP meeting for a student with a disability.

Following formal teaching observations, mentors and participants engaged in reflective debriefing sessions, conducted either in person or virtually, to discuss instructional practice and identify areas for growth. While mentors and participants could elect to exceed the minimum expectations, including conducting additional formal observations, the expectations outlined above represented the required components of the mentorship experience for all participants.

Data Source

Two researcher-created surveys were developed for this study: (a) a pre- and post-survey and (b) a brief follow-up survey. The pre- and post-survey was designed to assess participants' perceptions of their readiness to teach before and after participation in the mentorship experience. The follow-up survey was designed to capture participants' perceptions of the mentorship experience near the end of their first year working as special education teachers. All surveys were administered in English and hosted on a secure online platform. Participants received university-branded paraphernalia as a token of appreciation for their participation; no additional incentives were provided.

The pre- and post-surveys included 22 items consisting of one inclusionary question, six demographic questions, one categorical item, and 15 five-point Likert-scale items. Survey items were organized into three domains: mentor resources, readiness to teach special education, and readiness to teach other diverse student populations not including disability. The pre- and post-surveys underwent multiple rounds of review and revision prior to dissemination to ensure clarity, alignment with study objectives, and relevance to pre-service special education teaching contexts.

The brief follow-up survey included eight

items consisting of two demographic questions, two categorical items, and four five-point Likert-scale items. The reduced length of the follow-up survey was intentional, allowing for faster completion time and a greater response rate by participants who were no longer enrolled in the program and were working full time as special education teachers. Similar to the pre- and post-surveys, follow-up survey items were reviewed and refined prior to dissemination to ensure relevance and clarity.

Survey Measures

Survey items were combined to create composite variables for analysis. Perceptions of mentorship was measured using three five-point Likert-scale items: I believe ... (1) teacher-mentors are useful resources to pre-service teachers, (2) teacher-mentors play an important role in the success of a first year teacher in the classroom, and (3) mentorship from an experienced and qualified teacher should be required for all first year teachers. Responses were averaged to create composite variables representing pre- and post-survey perceptions of mentorship. Readiness to teach special education was measured with four Likert-scale items: I am ... (1) prepared to enter the classroom as a solo teacher, (2) confident in my content knowledge, (3) confident in my classroom/behavior management skills, and (4) confident in my ability to lead IEP meetings for my students. Responses were averaged to create composite variables for pre- and post-survey readiness to teach.

Readiness to teach diverse populations was measured with three Likert-scale items: I am ... (1) prepared to teach students with varying abilities, (2) prepared to teach students with disabilities from diverse linguistic, racial, or ethnic backgrounds, and (3) prepared to teach students with disabilities from varying genders, sexes, or sexual orientations.

Responses were averaged to create composite variables for pre- and post-survey perceptions of diversity readiness.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential approaches. Descriptive analyses were used to provide contextual information on participant responses for research questions 1 and 3. Inferential analyses consisted of paired samples t-tests used to examine changes in perceptions over time for research questions 1 and 2. All data were analyzed using IBM SPSS software.

For research questions 1 and 2, paired samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant mean change between participants' pre- and post-survey perceptions. For research question 1, no outliers were detected. For research question 2, one outlier was identified; inspection of this data point indicated it was not an extreme deviation and was therefore retained in the analysis. The assumption of normality was met for both analyses, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test ($p = .24$).

Results

Study results are presented by research question; for each question, descriptive statistics and inferential analyses are summarized, with full statistical details reported in Tables 2 and 3.

How do special education pre-service teachers perceive mentorship after engaging in a mentorship experience?

Participants reported strong and positive perceptions of the mentorship experience. Nearly all participants (92%) indicated that they benefited from mentorship, with 62% strongly agreeing and 38% agreeing that mentor observation and feedback sessions were beneficial. Overall perceptions of mentorship increased significantly from the pre-survey

to the post-survey. Mean mentorship scores increased from 3.56 ($SD = 0.60$) to 4.24 ($SD = 0.53$), and a paired-samples t-test indicated that this increase was statistically significant ($p < .001$), with a medium effect size ($d = 0.59$). See Table 2.

How do special education pre-service teachers perceive their readiness to teach after engaging in a mentorship experience?

Participants reported statistically significant gains in their readiness to teach special education following the mentorship experience. Mean readiness scores increased from 2.85 ($SD = 0.54$) on the pre-survey to 3.25 ($SD = 0.56$) on the post-survey. A paired-samples t-test indicated that this increase was statistically significant ($p < .001$), with a medium effect size ($d = 0.43$).

In contrast, participants' perceptions of their readiness to teach diverse student populations remained relatively stable over time. Mean scores decreased slightly from 3.33 ($SD = 0.65$) to 3.27 ($SD = 0.64$); however, this change was not statistically significant ($p = .46$). Together, these findings suggest that while mentorship was associated with increased perceptions of readiness to teach special education, it did not correspond to perceived gains in preparedness for teaching diverse populations. Full results are presented in Table 2. ***One year after the mentorship experience, do study participants perceive mentorship to be useful in preparing for the first year of teaching?***

At the one-year follow-up, most (75%) participants strongly agreed or agreed that the mentorship experience provided valuable knowledge and skills during their first year of teaching.

However, fewer participants felt prepared for case management responsibilities (42%), and only a small portion felt prepared to teach diverse student populations (16%). Consistent with findings from

research question two, 59% reported that their mentorship experience did not adequately prepare

them to work with diverse learners. At the same time,

Table 2

Perceptions of Mentorship and Readiness to Teach

	Pre-Survey <i>M (SD)</i>	Post-Survey <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i> (25)	<i>p</i>	Mean Diff	SE Diff	95% CI	
							Lower	Upper
Mentorship (RQ1)	3.56 (0.60)	4.24 (0.53)	5.92	<.001	0.68	0.11	0.443	0.915
Readiness to Teach (RQ2)	2.85 (0.54)	3.25 (0.56)	4.69	<.001	0.40	0.09	0.224	0.576
Readiness: Diverse Populations (RQ2)	3.33 (0.65)	3.27 (0.64)	−0.76	.46	−0.06	0.09	−0.238	0.110

58% indicated that they were satisfied with their current jobs as special education teachers, and half reported that they remained connected with their

mentors for advice and support. A summary of follow-up survey responses is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

One-Year Follow-Up Survey Results

Survey Item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neither	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
Gained valuable knowledge/skills (not related to case management)	75%	17%	8%
Prepared for case management duties	42%	33%	25%
Prepared to teach diverse populations	16%	25%	59%
Satisfied with current job as special education teacher	58%	25%	17%
Still connected with mentor (seeking advice/support)	50%	—	—

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of mentorship from veteran teachers on pre-service special education teachers following a year-long mentorship experience. Gathering perceptions from participants one year after the mentorship experience ended, during their first year

as practicing teachers, also provided additional insight into how mentorship supported preparation for the realities of the classroom and profession.

Findings from the pre- and post-surveys indicate that pre-service teachers perceived the mentorship experience positively. Participants viewed mentors as useful resources, felt that

mentors played an important role in preparing them for their first year as classroom teachers, and believed that mentorship from veteran teachers would benefit all first year teachers. One year after the experience, most participants continued to view mentorship as useful in preparing them to become special education teachers, and over half reported satisfaction with their current positions. This is an especially encouraging outcome given the well-documented challenges related to special education teacher retention (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). These findings align with prior research emphasizing the critical role of mentorship in supporting new teachers as they enter the profession (Billingsley et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2013). Training and mentorship that support teachers in navigating complex classroom and student needs may contribute to a more positive and sustainable early career experience. Together, these results highlight the potential long-term value of mentorship embedded within special education educator preparation programs.

Much of the existing research on mentorship in special education has focused on novice teachers during their induction years (Billingsley et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2013). In contrast, this study contributes to the literature by examining mentorship during the pre-service phase of teacher preparation. By centering mentorship within educator preparation programs, these findings extend research on induction and suggest that structured mentoring prior to assuming full classroom responsibility may help ease the transition into the profession (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021; Ortogero et al., 2022). Study findings further highlight the effectiveness of mentorship in supporting the development of practical skills essential for classroom and career success. Participants reported positive perceptions of mentorship in preparing them to teach content,

manage classroom behavior, and lead IEP meetings. This is consistent with prior studies demonstrating that hands-on mentorship can enhance new teachers' self-efficacy in core instructional and professional responsibilities (e.g., Nougaret et al., 2005; Washburn et al., 2012). Interestingly, while participants continued to feel positively about mentorship in relation to instructional preparation, they reported lower confidence in their preparedness for case management responsibilities one year after the mentorship experience ended. These responsibilities included writing and leading IEPs, conducting compliance-related tasks, and coordinating services.

This discrepancy may reflect the highly individualized and variable nature of case management in special education. Because each student's needs and services differ, pre-service teachers may not encounter the full range of case management scenarios during a single mentorship experience. As a result, participants may have had limited exposure to the more complex or nuanced aspects of special education case management, leaving them feeling less prepared to handle these aspects of the job independently once they transitioned to full-time teaching. Given the importance of meeting the requirements of IDEA and ensuring that students' IEPs are fully implemented, case management represents a substantial and demanding component of special education practice. These findings suggest that mentorship experiences may benefit from more explicit attention to case management training and support.

Across the study, participants also indicated feeling unprepared to teach students with disabilities from diverse linguistic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and from varying genders, sexes, and sexual orientations. Even after gaining additional

classroom experience, participants continued to identify gaps in mentorship support related to teaching and supporting diverse learners.

It is also important to acknowledge that the increases in participants' perception of readiness to teach special education may not be solely attributable to mentorship. As participants advanced through a year of fieldwork, they gained experience with lesson planning, instructional delivery, and navigating classroom responsibilities. These authentic teaching experiences likely contributed to their increased confidence and preparedness. Thus, mentorship should be understood as one influential practice factor among several that supported participants' growth, rather than the only explanation for these improvements.

Overall, the findings suggest that the mentorship experience, as currently structured, may not adequately address the complexity of teaching in diverse classrooms. This is particularly concerning given the increasing diversity of the K-12 student population in U.S. schools (Nowicki, 2022) and special education teachers' likelihood of teaching diverse groups of students (Anderson, 2020; Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2021). California's pre-service teachers must be equipped to effectively support students with disabilities from varied backgrounds. Providing opportunities to learn and practice culturally responsive teaching within mentorship experiences, under the guidance of experienced mentors, may strengthen preparation in this area.

Implications for Educator Preparation Programs

Taken together, these findings have important implications for educator preparation programs. Mentorship experiences within special education preparation programs should extend beyond instructional and classroom management

support to more intentionally address case management responsibilities and culturally responsive teaching practices. Programs may also benefit from ensuring that mentor training reflects current challenges in the field and supports mentors in developing the knowledge and skills needed to model and guide pre-service teachers effectively. As McElwee et al. (2018) note, limited access to authentic, real-world teaching experiences can be a significant barrier for pre-service teachers. Strengthening mentor preparation in these areas may help programs better equip future special education teachers for the complex demands of their work.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that inform directions for future research. First, the sample size was relatively small ($N = 26$) and lacked substantial variability in age and gender, which may limit generalizability. Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples drawn from multiple educator preparation programs to better understand how mentorship impacts different groups of pre-service special education teachers.

Second, although the survey measures captured perceptions related to instruction and behavior management, they provided less insight into preparedness for case management and teaching diverse student populations. The findings suggest that future research would benefit from more targeted survey items examining these areas in greater depth. Expanding measurement in this way may help clarify how mentorship influences preparation for these critical aspects of special education practice.

An additional area for future research involves examining models used to prepare mentors for their roles. While mentor training in this study

aligned with established research on effective mentorship (e.g., Billingsley et al., 2019; Clarke et al., 2014; Garza et al., 2019; Gonser, 2022; Hunt et al., 2013; Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021; Ortogero et al., 2022), further evaluation is needed to ensure that mentor preparation incorporates current best practices, particularly related to diversity. Refining mentor training models may enhance mentors' capacity to support pre-service teachers in increasingly diverse classroom contexts.

Conclusion

Findings from this study further affirm that mentorship is a vital element in special education teacher preparation. The value of mentorship is

evident in its ability to boost new teachers' confidence, enhance their instructional practices, and improve classroom management skills. At the same time, this study highlights gaps in teacher preparation, particularly related to case management and working with diverse student populations, that educator preparation programs must address. As the education landscape continues to evolve, especially amid persistent teacher shortages, the integration of comprehensive mentorship throughout educator preparation programs is not only beneficial but essential for cultivating a well-equipped and resilient special education workforce.

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