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Mentorship of Special Education Teachers of Students who have Treatment and Rehabilitation Needs

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the role of mentorship in enhancing the self-efficacy of special education teachers working with students requiring treatment and rehabilitation. It also explores how mentorship supports the implementation of the new Ontario Language (OME, 2023) curriculum within Education and Community Partnership Programs (ECPP). A qualitative case study approach was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three experienced mentors and one mentee from a publicly funded Ontario school board. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to mentorship and teacher self-efficacy. The study identified four major themes: teacher isolation, challenges of language and literacy instruction and the new Ontario Language curriculum, congruous mentorship support in ECPP settings, and informal communications and responsive mentorship. Findings highlight the importance of trust-building and technology in mentorship. This study is relevant to educators, policymakers, and administrators in special education, mentorship programs, and alternative education settings. It provides insights for improving teacher support systems within ECPP and similar learning environments. This study contributes to the limited research on mentorship for special education teachers in ECPP. It highlights the role of mentorship in overcoming professional isolation, improving instructional practices, and integrating technology to enhance teacher development.*

Key words*: Mentorship, Self-efficacy, Special education teachers, Teacher isolation.*

1. Introduction

In accordance with international agreements such as the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*, inclusive education stands as a fundamental right for all individuals (United Nations, 2006). Article 24 of the *CRPD* recognizes the right of individuals with disabilities to equitable education in inclusive spaces (United Nations, 2006). For decades, schools within the Province of Ontario and beyond have focused on the inclusion of students with exceptionalities into the mainstream school context; however, educators still continue to adapt inclusive policies into practices that are responsive to and meet the needs of all students within our educational spaces (Massouti, 2018). While an inclusive learning environment is the ideal context, some students require temporary individualized support to access a meaningful, safe, and effective schooling experience (Mirza, 2022).

In Ontario's publicly funded school boards, Education and Community Partnership Programs (ECPP) programs focus on providing students who have complex needs (e.g., physical, emotional, medical, behavioural, psychiatric) with care, treatment or rehabilitation while they are at school (OME, 2023a). ECPP students have a high rate of exceptionalities (Mirza, 2022) and among the most marginalized and disadvantaged youth in Ontario (Gang, 2015) who require short-term treatment supports to help them be successful in mainstream classroom environments (OME, 2023a).

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ECPP programs are situated in locations based on the complex needs of these students such as hospitals, corrections, social service organizations, community group homes, children's mental health centres, as well as mainstream elementary and secondary schools where students are included in their typical classrooms for a portion of the school day (OME, 2023a). Within ECPP programs, school-based and community mental health supports must be readily available (Gang, 2015). For ECPP programs, the school board and the agencies work collaboratively on programming (OME, 2023a). With communication and transferable skills being a strong focus and individualized educational programming remaining at the forefront of these classrooms, the intention is to provide necessary treatment, close academic gaps and then transition students back into their regular classrooms full-time (OME, 2023a). In this way, ECPP classrooms are seen as temporary to prepare students for the mainstream classroom environment so that they may be included and not 'othered' from a social justice perspective (Mirza, 2022).

ECPP teachers are Ontario Certified Teachers with specialized training in special education (e.g., Additional Qualifications in Special Education). Many of these teachers also have training in restorative practices and theory of mind which is the ability to understand the mental state of others in order to predict the behaviours of others (Mirza, 2022). Many ECPP teachers strive to create lessons that engender transferable skills such as self-regulation and mindfulness to support their students (Bockman & Yu, 2023). ECPP teachers are flexible to work within varied environments to meet their students' needs and provide effective, appropriate instruction, but they require professional learning and ongoing training themselves. There is a clear lack of literature about ECPP programs and the needs of their special education teachers.

2. Theoretical Framework

Early career teachers can experience stress attributed to the demands of appreciating the diverse needs of their students, understanding and adapting to school cultures, and balancing personal and professional responsibilities (Ma et. al., 2021). Teacher self-efficacy plays a crucial role in early-career teachers' decisions to remain in the profession, reflecting their beliefs in their abilities to handle such demands of teaching (Ma et. al., 2021). Teacher self-efficacy is defined as a teacher's judgement of their own abilities to achieve desired outcomes in student achievement and learning outcomes (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Self-efficacy among teachers can enhance persistence in dealing with challenging students and influence various aspects of their professional and personal lives (Zee & Koomen, 2016).

The concept of teacher self-efficacy originates from Bandura's social-cognitive theory (1977) which broadly refers to a teacher's ability to handle tasks, obligations and challenges faced within their professional role as an educator. Teacher self-efficacy supports teachers' mental health, job satisfaction, and student success and learning (Bandura, 1977). Teacher self-efficacy can be impacted by several factors, including teachers' values and motivations – teachers with greater openness to experiences and conscientiousness scored higher in their sense of self-efficacy (Barni et al., 2019). Teachers within an ECPP program are likely to have strong personal values that have guided them into their unique roles of supporting students with high levels of treatment needs in diverse contexts. This is significant as teachers tend to measure their own self-efficacy lower when working with students with disabilities (Guo et al., 2021). Being a teacher with high self-efficacy is essential when working with students with significant behavioural, emotional, and psychological needs, like those in ECPP classrooms (Gang, 2015).

3. Literature Review

For over two decades, literature has documented the demanding role of the special education teacher relative to their needs as a professional. Beginning special education teachers are particularly vulnerable to stress and have long expressed the need for relationships with and support from colleagues, administrators, and mentors (Herman et al., 2023). A recent case study documented a beginning special education teacher's unequivocal need for a mentor who is qualified, makes pointed observations, supports planning time, and has a strong work ethic (Smith Washington, 2024). Herman et al. (2023) profile special education teachers who report high levels of stress for those who are teaching in environments with a low proportion of other special education teachers and perceive a lack of administrative support for student behaviours; clearly, there are implications for the well-being and retention of special education teachers and this is especially the case in ECPP classrooms where teachers are paired with agency staff to provide students with instruction and treatment.

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3.1. Teacher Self-Efficacy and Mentoring

The connection between teacher self-efficacy and mentoring has been documented for some time. Active mentorship, guidance, and support from mentors increases teacher self-efficacy in instructional practices (Burger, 2024). Helpful and impactful mentors can facilitate mentee teachers' initial mastery of skills by providing instructional support, acting as role models, and offering coaching and feedback (Burger, 2024).

Collaborative mentoring partnerships have been linked to improved well-being and confidence among novice teachers (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019). Indeed, mentors who have training in evidence-based instructional practices, coaching, providing feedback/debriefing, and facilitating mentees' reflections have both the knowledge and skills to mentor beginning special education teachers (Ortogero et al., 2022). As well, specific support for special education teachers in high-leverage practice areas (e.g., assessment, instruction, social, emotional, behavioural, collaboration) through professional development, mentoring and collaboration is particularly effective (Billingsley et al., 2019).

Similar to teaching and professional learning, technology use in mentoring can make the process accessible, flexible, and convenient. Online mentoring can ameliorate for the isolation that beginning teachers might feel and offer forums for reflection (Dempsey et al., 2009). Specifically, online communities of practice contributed positively to the self-efficacy of special education teachers who received training and mentoring in behaviour management strategies (Gebbie et al, 2012).

3.2. Special Education Teachers' Language and Literacy Instruction

A survey of U.S. special education teachers' language and literacy instructional knowledge found that they were inferior to their classroom teacher and reading interventionist colleagues (Porter et al., 2022). Literacy instruction is a core subject area that special education teachers often address with their students along with other education professionals (e.g., speech-language pathologists). To support the literacy instruction of their special education students, special education professionals should focus as a professional team of educators on communication, co-teaching, and interprofessional collaboration (Gosselin & Sundeen, 2019). Relevant here is that teacher self-efficacy is critical for providing effective reading instruction for all students and positively impacts self-efficacy in teaching reading (Authors, 2016).

In the Province of Ontario, there is a recent and significant focus for ECPP teachers to improve students' skills in literacy (Gang, 2015), yet, there is little research on which teaching methods are most helpful to the reading improvement for students in ECPP settings. Concurrently, the Ontario Human Rights Commission recently released their report the *Right to Read* (OHRC, 2022a), which emphasized the failure of reading instruction for students with special needs in the Province. The Ontario Ministry of Education's response to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's *Right to Read* report has been a pledge to engage stakeholders, revise curricula, provide professional development for educators, and develop resources to support literacy skills (OHRC, 2022b). There is a clear need for future research to be conducted on how to support ECPP teachers' self-efficacy and language and literacy instruction for these students with treatment and rehabilitation needs - mentorship may be a viable pursuit.

3.3. Research Questions

This research study was conducted at an ECPP school in central Ontario where the teachers participate in a dedicated program of orientation and professional learning. This professional learning is founded on collegial mentorship with a current focus on implementing the new Ontario *Language* (OME, 2023) curriculum within the ECPP context. The current study elucidates the impact of how mentorship has played a part in teacher PL and teacher self-efficacy. Accordingly, the following research questions were posed:

1) What are the common challenges and needs of beginning ECPP teachers and how are they supported through mentorship?
2) How do mentors communicate and support ECPP teacher mentees?

4. Methodology

In this generic qualitative method (Kahlke, 2014), the researchers sought to elucidate beginning ECPP teachers' challenges and how mentors support them, especially as this relates to teaching the Ontario *Language* (OME, 2023) curriculum. Generic qualitative methods are interpretive as they attempt to document how individuals derive meaning from their experiences and the world (Kahlke, 2014). These methods are

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especially helpful for exploring nuanced or under-researched topics like mentorship in a highly specialized ECPP setting, as they allow flexibility in discovering themes and patterns that might not emerge through structured, quantitative approaches (Kahlke, 2014).

4.1. Research Site and Participants

The research site was an ECPP school with 11 elementary and 37 secondary classrooms. There are two administrators, approximately 48 teachers, and 12 partner agencies to support the diverse treatment needs of the students in treatment and rehabilitation programs. All teachers were mentored in their entry into the ECPP classroom environment.

Four ECPP teachers volunteered to be interviewed: three were experienced teacher-mentors and one was currently a teacher-mentee. All of these participants are Ontario Certified Teachers who are at various stages of their careers. Teacher-Mentor A has 20 years of teaching experience, most of which has been in ECPP and they have mentored one teacher. Teacher-Mentor B has mentored six ECPP teachers in their 10 years of experience. Teacher-Mentor C supports ECPP teachers in various classrooms with over 30 years of teaching experience and significant mentoring experience. Teacher-Mentee D has been teaching for eight years with six years of ECPP experience and has recent experience being mentored in the ECPP environment.

4.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected in Spring 2024 from one-on-one interviews with the first author and the participants. The interview prompts for Teacher-Mentee D questioned them about their experiences on the issues that they perceived that they needed mentorship on while learning how to adapt to the role of an ECPP teacher. The interview questions for the three Teacher-Mentors asked about their experiences mentoring new ECPP teachers including common challenges that require mentorship and how mentors can best support Teacher-Mentees in overcoming these challenges that are often specific to ECPPs. There were also discussions on manners in which technology can support the mentor-mentee relationship and how mentorship has played a role in their development as language teachers in the ECPP environment.

Reflections were collected by the first author during the research process related to the interview process, the participants' receptivity as well as participants' additional comments on mentorship, literacy, technology use, and other topics relevant to the ECPP teacher experience. Together the first and second authors debriefed about the reflections to further interpret them in light of the content of the participants' interview responses.

Data were analyzed with preliminary coding (Saldana, 2013) of the interview transcriptions and the researcher's reflections completed by the first author and then cross-confirmed by the second author (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This coding consisted of highlighting phrases that alluded to the challenges/needs of ECPP teachers and communication/support from Teacher-Mentors. The codes were categorized (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) into five broad topics (mentorship types, informal mentorship, technology, language and literacy, frequency of mentorship) and then assigned meaningful phrases that describe the lived experiences of the participants and how mentorship in the ECPP environment has shaped their literacy practices. The phrases were then analyzed to identify and understand themes that emerged from these conversations described next as findings.

4.3. Findings

Four major themes emerged as findings from interviewing ECPP teachers. The first two themes are presented in response to the first research question: the isolation of ECPP teachers, and collegial support for the implementation of the new Ontario *Language* (OME, 2023) curriculum. The remaining two themes address the second research question with respect to supporting mentorship: congruous mentorship within the ECPP space, informal communications and responsive mentorship.

4.4. Teacher Isolation in ECPP

A most notable finding of this study was the clear challenge that teachers feel isolated and vulnerable in their ECPP classrooms. Teachers are often placed in schools where they are the only ECPP teachers in these spaces or are placed in agency settings (e.g. hospitals, corrections facilities, etc.) where they may even be the only teacher in the building. Teacher-Mentor C stressed the importance of reaching out for support when needed as teaching in an ECPP class can feel quite isolating.

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> I have found through ECPP that if you are not at a transitional location, you feel like you are floating on an island all by yourself and you feel as though you are the only person who has questions…You feel vulnerable…Understanding how isolating and vulnerable it could be if you're placed at a location in a church building, in a storefront without another teacher, and you might be a little bit more introverted…You're scared. (Teacher-Mentor C)

Furthermore, this Teacher-Mentor also underscored the impact of mentorship on retention as they shared that previously one teacher quit their ECPP position due to a feeling of isolation in the role. Other Teacher-Mentors highlighted the benefits of small groups in fostering relationships which further supports the idea that mentors and mentees face the challenge of seclusion and need collegial connections. For example, "What I liked about that [the mentoring program] was it was a fortified small enough group that everybody was developing relationships. I hope we make new people feel welcome" (Teacher-Mentor A). It was apparent that ECPP teachers recognize the importance of having another teacher to turn to for support when in need - an educator who empathetically understands the ECPP context.

The social reciprocal nature of mentorship was highlighted by all of the participants, emphasizing that being a good mentee contributes to becoming a good mentor in the future through developing leadership skills and building professional relationships. This was articulated by Teacher-Mentor B, "You're not making work. We're here to support each other."

Mentorship happened through varied means within this space. These methods included formal meetings and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) which are recognized as instrumental for ongoing professional learning, development, and collaboration (Brown, et. al., 2018). Key aspects include shared governance, collaboration, and ongoing professional development, which collectively foster a supportive community that improves outcomes for students (Brown, et. al, 2018). Mentors are encouraged to introduce mentees to PLCs and opportunities to foster collegial connections and professional learning. This also creates a community to support one another within the ECPP school as a whole and reduce the perception of isolation.

4.5. Support to Implement the new Ontario Language (OME, 2023) curriculum

The participants also commented on their perceptions of the recent changes to the new Ontario *Language* (OME, 2023) curriculum. Participants expressed enthusiasm and optimism for the new curriculum, particularly its focus on early phonics instruction, reading comprehension, and its emphasis on building students' confidence in reading and other literacy skills. One participant acknowledged their past challenges in teaching literacy to students below grade level within the ECPP environment emphasizing the importance of teaching basic skills such as decoding, "Now I see when we're starting to read and they're reading out loud, they've got a little bit more confidence" (Teacher-Mentee D).

Another participant expressed positive views about the changes to the Ontario *Language* (OME, 2023) curriculum, particularly in how it addresses the various needs of students in treatment and rehabilitation classrooms. With a focus on foundational skills in reading and writing, participants perceived benefits for ECPP students in grades 4-8 who often struggle with language and literacy. A sentiment that was stated by another participant was the importance of transferable skills (e.g., digital literacies, collaboration) to support ECPP students; this is now included as part of the Ontario *Language* (OME, 2023) curriculum.

> But for some students, it's [teaching transferable skills] been amazing for them and it's made a lot of connections and the willingness to try and kind of be more engaged, which again, once they're engaged in those academics, we've been seeing less behaviors. (Teacher-Mentee D).

Participants also highlighted the challenges, including the need for flexibility in curriculum implementation to accommodate the diverse treatment and rehabilitation needs of students in ECPP classrooms. A teacher-mentee emphasized that it is important for ECPP teachers to share instructional resources for the multiple grade levels in their ECPP classrooms. Technology such as a shared drive for digital resources is one method in which ECPP teachers supported one another in sharing curriculum resources, continuously building and adapting them to meet their students' needs.

Participants also discussed the need for continued scaffolds for ECPP teachers to address the ongoing challenges of student behaviours and mental health needs. Teacher-Mentor A noted that the Ontario *Language* (OME, 2023) curriculum's suitability varies depending on individual student needs, with some students benefiting greatly while others may struggle or exhibit increased behavioural issues, "And one of the primary things we see in our classroom with kids struggling with some mental health issues or trauma issues is I can't

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get them to school" (Teacher-Mentor A). When students are frequently absent, the curriculum cannot be covered.

This response underscores the importance of supporting student diversity of learning needs in language and literacy (Researcher's Reflections). Generally, the ECPP teachers interviewed expressed optimism related to the changes to the Ontario *Language* (OME, 2023) curriculum and the potential impacts on student learning. Overall, educators' responses reflect a positive perspective on the curriculum revisions and the importance of supporting students in the ECPP environment while also formally and informally mentoring ECPP teachers to deliver language and literacy instruction.

4.6. Congruous Mentorship Supports in ECPP

It became clear from the participants' responses that it was important for there to be frequent and meaningful communication among the Teacher-Mentors and Teacher-Mentees to ensure that the latter feel supported in their role in the ECPP context. The amount of communication was dependent on a number of factors such as location of their classroom and their particular program. A participant commented on the frequency of communications between Teacher-Mentors and Teacher-Mentees related to specific ECPP program issues "…as often as needed we could be daily in the beginning and then you know two to three times a week or whatever's required…like doors always open" (Teacher-Mentor B).

One experienced Teacher-Mentor underscored the importance of trust and empathy in the mentorship dyad (Researcher's Reflections). She urged Teacher-Mentors to be genuinely willing to invest time and effort into supporting new Teacher-Mentees within the ECPP environment.

> Well, number one, trust right? Because that person is going to be vulnerable and they want to know that their vulnerability that is being shown and shared is between those two people and so absolutely trust. I think if you're truly going to be a mentor, you, you've got to have empathy. (Teacher-Mentor C)

It was also apparent, especially in the initial stages of teaching in an ECPP setting, that face-to-face mentor-mentee interactions are crucial to building a caring and supportive professional relationship (Researcher's Reflection).

Understanding the complex operations of the ECPP school, such as education plans, transition processes and the various administrative tasks that are involved in treatment programs, was highlighted as essential knowledge for new ECPP teachers. There was also importance placed on maintaining confidentiality of treatment and educational information and navigating relationships in the classroom were acknowledged as potential challenges.

> Just because obviously, we want to be mindful all the time about student confidentiality, but we also have additional information that we get from the agency that you know we have to be so sensitive to, and the fact that we can't include any of it in the transition plans and the education plans, I am very cautious. (Teacher-Mentee D)

There was a significant need for maintaining confidentiality in these unique educational spaces (Researcher's Reflections). Having a supportive mentor who can provide guidance and validation is crucial for new ECPP teachers, especially in navigating the administrative challenges that are typically exclusive to the ECPP environment.

Appreciating the role of partnered agencies in the ECPP classroom, particularly in managing responsibilities and fostering collaboration was also discussed as important to support Teacher-Mentees. These relationships are partnerships among ECPP teachers and agency staff members who operate collaboratively to support the day-to-day needs of students. An ambiguous area that encompasses ECPP classrooms where teachers' and treatment workers' roles can overlap can be a significant challenge for teachers and agency staff alike and this requires specific mentorship supports.

> One of the questions that would come up [is related to] those sorts of relationship pieces or boundary pieces between the agency and school. Whose responsibility is what? Who do you need to follow up with that kind of issue? (Teacher-Mentor A).

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4.7. Informal Communication and Responsive Mentorship

The participants' responses suggest a multi-faceted approach to mentoring new teachers, focusing on not only frequent communication, but also check-ins, and informal conversational support throughout the school year. Teacher-Mentee D emphasized the importance of frequent communication, especially in the initial months to navigate administrative procedures, ensure sensitivity to student confidentiality, understand the operations of the ECPP school and address any challenges that may arise. When discussing how often mentors and mentees should be connecting with one another, one participant stated, "…as often as needed we could be daily in the beginning and then you know two to three times a week or whatever's required - like doors always open." (Teacher-Mentor B). Another Teacher-Mentor recommended bi-weekly check-ins for new teachers, irrespective of their familiarity with teaching or the ECPP context, "If I was mentoring somebody new to ECPP, who may not be new to teaching, I would suggest to them to contact me anytime, but I would definitely want to check in with them once every two weeks" (Teacher-Mentor C). Then there might be a gradual decrease in the interactions as the Teacher-Mentee becomes more comfortable and independent in their role.

By having frequent, informal check-ins, the Teacher-Mentor can build a relationship with the Teacher-Mentee to fully understand the nuanced challenges they face and how to support them. This process might include off-site meetings to foster a relaxed atmosphere conducive to open sharing. By meeting for a coffee, for example, the Teacher-Mentor and Teacher-Mentee are in a relaxed environment to share ideas and challenges with the role. Ensuring that the Teacher-Mentee knows that they are welcome to reach out often contributes to them not feeling isolated within the role. One mentor suggested that the mentee needs to feel comfortable to ask questions as they arise, "There is no dumb question. Every one of us, and I still have questions" (Teacher-Mentor C). Overall, it was concluded that it is important that mentors need to create an open environment where asking for help is welcomed (Researcher's Reflections).

Given the need to support ECPP teachers to feel connected, the use of technology for communicating with mentors became significantly more important. One participant suggested using email to initially connect new teachers with experienced colleagues, creating a supportive network without the inconvenience of direct outreach.

> …typically it was through email [that I would ask], 'Am I able to give you a quick call and then go from there?' I feel like the big piece was conversation and just being able to kind of talk it out. (Teacher-Mentee D)

Communication tools such as text messages and phone calls were also assistive especially given the dispersed nature of the ECPP program across a school board. This communication which typically happened multiple times per week, was essential in the early stages of the Teacher-Mentee's development, "She would just give me a call whenever she had a question, so probably several times a month anyway" (Teacher-Mentor A). Teacher-Mentor B highlighted the convenience of phone calls for addressing spontaneous questions or immediate assistance when a question or a concern is more urgent; this was often addressing procedural queriers and clarifying boundary issues between the agencies and ECPP school. Overall, technology served as a significant tool for connecting Teacher-Mentors and Teacher-Mentees, providing ongoing reinforcement, and ensuring adherence to established protocols and procedures within the ECPP program. Finally, the effective use of technology seemed to also combat mentees from feeling isolated within these spaces.

5. Discussion

This study has reinforced outcomes of the mentorship process for ECPP Teacher-Mentees and their Teacher-Mentors as they work to support students with treatment and rehabilitation needs and implement the new Ontario *Language* (OME, 2023) curriculum. This research, while conducted in a highly specialized setting, may be generalized to understand how to best support other special education teachers in their work supporting students with exceptionalities. Mentorship can contribute to teachers' confidence which can be a significant support to teachers within ECPP classrooms (Gang, 2015) and potentially contribute to teachers' literacy instruction self-efficacy (Authors, 2016). As such, documenting how mentorship has also played a part in the improvement of teacher self-efficacy can help us understand the most impactful mentorship strategies for special education teachers.

The first finding of this research suggests that isolation can be a significant detriment to teacher performance and job satisfaction. There is literature on teacher isolation being a struggle in many contexts which can be impactful on retention in their roles (Wold et. al., 2023). We also know that given the unique

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environments in which ECPP teachers work, feeling isolated can be a significant problem, especially for those teachers who are working in off-site locations such as hospitals and corrections facilities. By providing frequent mentorship opportunities and relationship building, mentors can decrease the amount of seclusion felt by new special education teachers. Indeed, teachers facing isolation can benefit from mentorship connections, which was apparent in various other studies (e.g., Schwan et al., 2020).

The general feeling from the ECPP teachers interviewed was optimism with respect to implementing the Ontario *Language* (OME, 2023) curriculum. In particular, the incorporation of transferable skills (e.g., digital literacy, collaboration, etc.) was the area that these teachers felt most positive about given that inclusion is the goal for students in ECPP classrooms. Indeed, building transferable skills in STEAM programs has benefitted students' skills in these curricular areas (Bertrand & Namukas, 2020). Furthermore, special education teachers emphasize the need for adequate support in modifying and adapting the curriculum to meet the diverse needs of their students, highlighting the importance of professional learning, resources, and collaboration with colleagues (Chow et. al., 2023).

The third finding underscores the importance of building relationships among mentors and mentees to enhance the congruity of the mentorship support. These relationships are essential in building trust for a mentee to be comfortable enough to bring forward perceived challenges to their mentor (Burger, 2024). Furthermore, building relationships will help mentors gain the information necessary to be able to provide guidance, resources, direction and other information to best serve their mentee in their particular classroom (Wold et. al., 2023). The findings of this study signal to the importance of frequent communication early in the mentorship process with a gradual release of responsibility (Collet, 2013) as the mentee gains more confidence, knowledge and understanding of the ECPP environment.

The fourth theme elucidated the type of mentorship used to support new ECPP teachers: informal and responsive. According to Du and Wang (2017), factors such as social interactions, time availability, organizational climate, and responsiveness to individual strengths and needs significantly influence the process of informal mentorship. While ECPP teachers are often placed in schools and partner agencies throughout a school board, the use of technology is essential to mentor teachers who are not in the same building. The Teacher-Mentors and Teacher-Mentee reported on the importance of understanding that both parties need to be open to emails, phone calls and text messages when an issue arises within the classroom. Research by Allen et al. (2017) highlights the effectiveness of online communities and virtual mentoring programs in providing ongoing support and professional development opportunities for teachers, regardless of their geographical location. Ensuring that the mentees understand this is important to the mentorship process. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), effective mentorship programs can enhance teacher capacity and instructional practices, leading to improved student outcomes. This is particularly relevant in this study as the ECPP teachers focused on gap closing in language and literacy learning.

5.1. Implications for Practice

Many provinces and territories have teacher induction programs in place. While the Ontario New Teacher Induction Program (OME, 2022) has guidelines in terms of how mentorship might take place to best support new teachers, there is little guidance regarding the types of the mentorship connections and any differentiation for novice special education teachers. The findings of this study point to the importance of frequent connections to support mentees, especially in alternative and special education settings. This mirrors the findings of Gehrke and McCoy (2007) who found that effective mentoring relationships significantly contributed to the professional development and retention of novice special education teachers. Specifically, mentoring provided emotional support, practical teaching strategies, and helped teachers navigate the challenges unique to special education, and increased teacher confidence and competence which in turn positively impacted student outcomes (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007).

At the beginning of the mentorship process, it is integral to gain trust and build a relationship between the mentee and mentor; this relationship foundation can be helpful in the retention of the former (Barron-Albers, 2022). Based on this recommendation, it is suggested that the mentor training given by school boards might focus on instilling an appreciation for how mentors build these professional relationships and prevent feelings of isolation in novice teachers. Furthermore, the provision of release time for mentors and mentees can also be a helpful tool to build a strong professional relationship between mentee and mentor.

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To effectively support special education teachers fostering social interactions, allocating time for mentorship activities, and creating conducive organizational contexts are essential, alongside recognizing individual characteristics that influence the mentoring process (Schwan et al., 2020). School boards should prioritize establishing supportive environments and positive school cultures to promote informal mentoring relationships, thereby enhancing teacher development and retention. Additionally, leveraging technology offers valuable opportunities for mentoring teachers who may not be physically present in the same spaces. Utilizing digital platforms and communication tools for virtual mentorship and knowledge sharing can overcome distance barriers, enhance access to resources, and provide peer support (Dempsey et al., 2009). By integrating technology, educational institutions can facilitate continuous learning and collaboration, further supporting the professional growth of special education teachers.

5.2. Future Research

Despite the importance of collaborative efforts among educational institutions and community organizations in addressing the multifaceted needs of students in treatment and rehabilitation programs, there remains a dearth of comprehensive literature exploring the nuances and outcomes of these programs. This lack of literature not only hinders our understanding of the efficacy of existing programs but also impedes the implementation of evidence-based practices tailored to the specific needs of the students and educators in these contexts. Further exploration and analysis of this literature will catalyze dialogue and collaboration among researchers, educators, treatment workers, and policymakers.

Through an examination of the findings of this study, it is clear that more research is needed to elucidate the perspectives of special education teachers, support staff, and students in the context of treatment and rehabilitation programs. Specifically, more research is needed related to the mentorship experiences in these alternative educational programs (both elementary and secondary levels) as it relates to teacher self-efficacy, retention, and the implementation of new curricula. By disseminating the complexities and potential outcomes of research in supporting students and teachers in treatment and rehabilitation educational settings, this literature has the potential to pave the way for more targeted research and the development of various approaches to educational equity and student well-being in Ontario and beyond. Future research could implement a multi-tiered study to examine how structured mentorship programs impact both the sense of isolation and skill development in teachers, with distinct phases focusing on mentor training, mentor-mentee interactions, and long-term outcomes for teachers in various educational settings.

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