

SUPPORTING NEW SPECIAL EDUCATORS: A THREE-DOMAIN PERSPECTIVE

Menyokong Guru Pendidikan Khas Baharu: Perspektif Tiga Domain

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ABSTRACT

Maintaining effective special educators is critical for inclusive education. Yet, new special educators face challenges that compromise their effectiveness, leading to early attrition. By following PRISMA guidelines, this systematic review synthesizes international evidence published between January 2019 and October 2024 on support systems that build resilience and sustain new special educators. Guided by an established theoretical framework of the induction year, the findings show that effective support works across three interconnected domains, which are professional support (specialized training in IEPs, family partnerships, and differentiated instruction), social support (mentoring, collaborative networks, and administrative backing), and personal support (emotional resources, stress management, and workplace well-being). This review validates the framework across diverse cultural contexts, identifies critical implementation features, and provides a validated roadmap for strengthening induction systems internationally, with relevance for education systems developing comprehensive teacher support infrastructures. The findings of this study can help policymakers to strengthen induction programs by embedding structured mentoring, formal emotional-support structures, and specialized professional development for new special educators.

Keywords: special educators; induction programs; teacher retention; systematic review; new teacher

ABSTRAK

Mengekalkan guru pendidikan khas yang berkesan adalah kritikal bagi menjayakan pendidikan inklusif. Namun, guru pendidikan khas baharu berdepan pelbagai cabaran yang boleh menjejaskan keberkesanan mereka dan mendorong kepada pengunduran awal daripada profesion. Dengan berpanduan garis panduan PRISMA, kajian sorotan sistematik ini mensintesis bukti antarabangsa yang diterbitkan antara Januari 2019 hingga Oktober 2024 berkaitan sistem sokongan yang membina daya tahan dan mengekalkan guru pendidikan khas baharu. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa sokongan yang berkesan berfungsi merentasi tiga domain yang saling berkaitan, iaitu sokongan profesional (latihan khusus dalam Pelan Pendidikan Individu/IEP, kerjasama dengan keluarga, dan pengajaran berbeza), sokongan sosial (pementoran, rangkaian kolaboratif, dan sokongan pentadbiran), serta sokongan peribadi (sumber emosi, pengurusan stres, dan kesejahteraan di tempat kerja). Sorotan ini mengesahkan kerangka tersebut merentasi pelbagai konteks budaya, mengenal pasti ciri-ciri pelaksanaan yang kritikal, dan menyediakan pelan hala tuju yang sah untuk memperkukuh sistem induksi di peringkat antarabangsa, khususnya relevan kepada sistem pendidikan yang sedang membangunkan infrastruktur sokongan guru yang komprehensif. Dapatan kajian ini dapat memberi panduan kepada pembuat dasar untuk memperkukuh program induksi dengan menerapkan pementoran berstruktur, struktur sokongan emosi formal, dan pembangunan profesional khusus untuk guru pendidikan khas baharu.

Kata kunci: guru pendidikan khas; program induksi; pengekalan guru; sorotan sistematik; guru baharu

INTRODUCTION

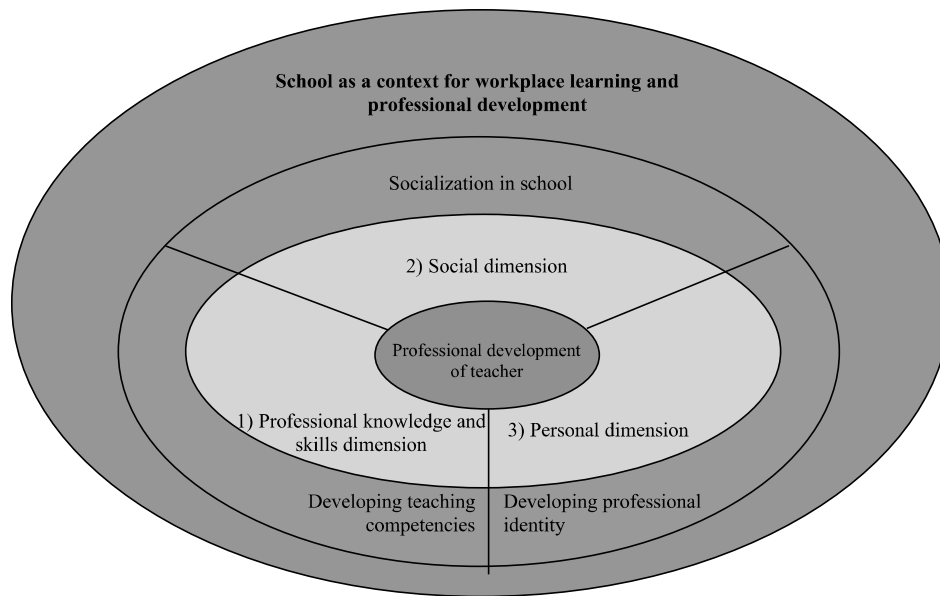
Special educators are teachers who plan and deliver specialised instruction for students with disabilities or additional learning needs, while also coordinating individualised programmes, services, and support around each student (Akçin, 2022). Maintaining an effective special educator workforce is essential to sustaining inclusive education. Special educators face demanding and complex responsibilities, especially in their early career years (Antoniou et al., 2024; Jeon et al., 2022). In addition to the standard teaching duties carried out by mainstream teachers, they are responsible for developing and implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (Akçin, 2022; Wong & Mohd Rashid, 2022), organizing multidisciplinary teams (Dillon et al., 2021), manage diverse behavioral challenges (Johnson et al., 2025; Van Den Brink et al., 2025), communicate with families experiencing stress (McKenna et al., 2025), keep the detailed records to meet legal compliance (Graham, 2025; Yell & Bradley, 2024), and adapt teaching strategies to meet the students' needs (Gaitas et al., 2025). These responsibilities eventually create cognitive loads and emotional demands that distinguish special education from mainstream teaching (McGrew et al., 2023).

Previous studies reported many first-year special educators leaving the profession, and in some places, the number grew even larger within the first three years (Jackson & Parker, 2023; Scott et al., 2022). These rates substantially exceed mainstream teacher attrition and impose high costs on education systems. High turnover may disrupt the continuity of student learning (Menziez, 2023), especially for students with special needs who rely on routine, stable relationships and steady teaching methods. School systems face recurring recruitment and training expenses, while remaining teachers experience increased workloads (Gavin & McGrath-Champ, 2024). Beyond the measurable costs, teacher turnover shows that the system failed to support teachers in these current challenging work settings.

Awareness of these challenges leads to increased attention to induction programs designed to support new special educators. An induction program refers to systematic support provided during teachers' early years, usually including mentoring, professional development, reduced workloads, and administrative support (Kwok & Macfarlane, 2025; Symeonidis et al., 2023). Studies have shown that well-designed induction programs can improve retention, teaching effectiveness, and job satisfaction (Gunn & McRae, 2021; Han, 2023; Kwok & Macfarlane, 2025). However, induction programs vary in design, implementation, and theoretical grounding (Courtney et al., 2023). Studies reported that many programs focus on general pedagogical support, which neglects the specified challenges unique to special educators (Chow et al., 2025; Kwok & Macfarlane, 2025). This diversity makes it difficult for policymakers and administrators to identify practical approaches and design evidence-based programs. Therefore, this paper intends to address two research questions: (1) What types of support are provided to new special educators during their induction years? and (2) To what extent do the empirical findings align with Eisenschmidt's three-domain framework of the induction year? By synthesising international evidence, this review makes three contributions. First, it consolidates fragmented findings into a coherent, theory-driven account of the support that enables new special educators to develop competence and remain in the profession. Second, it tests the cross-cultural applicability of Eisenschmidt (2006) framework within the specific and more demanding context of special education. Third, it offers policymakers and induction designers an evidence-based roadmap for strengthening early-career support systems. Clarifying these supports is significant because reducing early attrition among special educators directly protects the continuity of learning for students with disabilities, who depend on stable, skilled, and consistent teachers.

The Theoretical Foundations of the Induction Year (Eisenschmidt, 2006) was developed through longitudinal studies, which examined factors influencing new teachers' professional development, integration into school communities, and decisions to remain in or leave the profession (Eisenschmidt, 2006). The framework conceptualizes teacher induction as a critical transitional period that needs systematic support across professional development, social integration, and personal adaptation. Figure 1. shows the comprehensive framework of this theory.

Figure 1
The Theoretical Foundations of The Induction Year (Eisenschmidt, 2006)



Note: Figure uses colorblind-friendly palettes to support accessibility.

The professional domain encompasses (Left bottom) support for developing pedagogical knowledge, instructional skills, curriculum understanding, and classroom management capabilities (Figure 1). According to Eisenschmidt, the professional development that occurs during the induction program is different from what the new teachers face in pre-service preparation because this time, they are in a real field, facing real students, actual curriculum demands, and real workloads. For special educators, this domain includes specialized competencies such as IEP development, differentiated instruction, and evidence-based interventions for specific disabilities (Concepcion et al., 2025; Walker et al., 2024).

Secondly, the social domain, located in the upper middle (Figure 1), addresses integration into school communities and the development of collegial relationships that provide both instrumental and emotional support. Teaching does not occur only in classrooms; it also depends on collaborative relationships with colleagues, administrators, families, and, in some cases, specialists. In special education, partnership with families becomes an additional form of support, facilitated by administrators (Abdul Rahim et al., 2024; Burke et al., 2024).

Finally, the personal domain (bottom right) explains that teaching makes massive emotional demands and that new teachers must develop their own individual resources to manage stress, maintain well-being, and construct professional identities. The transition into real settings challenges their self-concepts, confidence, and emotions (Eisenschmidt, 2006). Even teachers with strong professional skills and social connections might leave the profession due to emotional exhaustion or misalignment between personal values and organizational demands.

METHODS

This review followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparent and rigorous identification, screening, eligibility, and appraisal of relevant research. The review examined peer-reviewed empirical studies between January 2019 and October 2024.

Identification

Identification is a process to search for any synonym, related terms, and variation for the main keywords for the study (Page et al., 2021). Table 1 shows the first step of how the authors identified the potential article to be reviewed. Starting with the main keywords consisting of supports, needed, new teacher, and special education, the authors expanded them into enriched keywords based on the synonyms of the main keywords.

Table 1
Full search strings used in selected databases

Database	Search Strings
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("supports" OR "aid" OR "assist" OR "guide") AND ("needed" OR "essential" OR "necessary" OR "required" OR "vital") AND ("new teacher" OR "novice teacher" OR "beginning teacher" OR "early career teacher" OR "newly qualified teacher") AND ("special education" OR "special needs"))
Science Direct	((("supports") AND ("needed" OR "essential") AND ("new teacher" OR "novice teacher" OR "beginning teacher") AND ("special education" OR "special needs"))
ERIC	((("supports" OR "aid" OR "assist" OR "guide") AND ("needed" OR "essential" OR "necessary" OR "required" OR "vital") AND ("new teacher" OR "novice teacher" OR "beginning teacher" OR "early career teacher" OR "newly qualified teacher") AND ("special education" OR "special needs"))
SAGE	((("supports" OR "aid" OR "assist" OR "guide") AND ("needed" OR "essential" OR "necessary" OR "required" OR "vital") AND ("new teacher" OR "novice teacher" OR "beginning teacher" OR "early career teacher" OR "newly qualified teacher") AND ("special education" OR "special needs"))
EBSCO-HOST	((("supports" OR "aid" OR "assist" OR "guide") AND ("needed" OR "essential" OR "necessary" OR "required" OR "vital") AND ("new teacher" OR "novice teacher" OR "beginning teacher" OR "early career teacher" OR "newly qualified teacher") AND ("special education" OR "special needs"))

Screening

In the screening process, the authors selected 360 articles using the criteria shown in Table 2 and following the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed based on the research question (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). A total of 15 articles were identified as duplicates and removed immediately, leaving 208 articles.

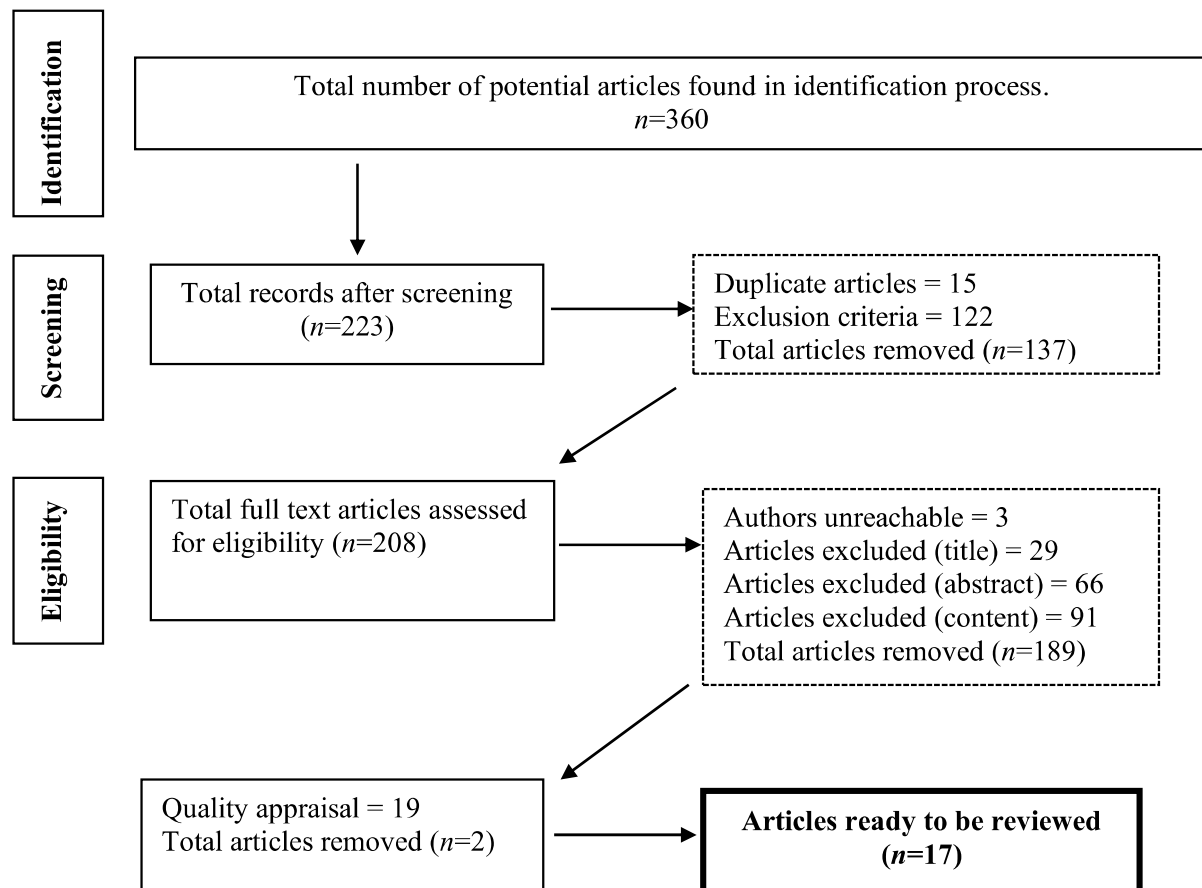
Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline	2019 – September 2024	Before 2019
Document	Article journal	Other than the article in the journal
Language	English	Non-English

Eligibility

To ensure the articles met the established inclusion criteria, the authors reviewed the remaining articles by thoroughly reading the titles, abstracts, or full texts. As shown in Figure 1, 208 full-text articles were initially selected for review. After excluding papers for which the authors could not be reached and those with unrelated titles, abstracts, or contents, 189 articles were removed. The final number of articles included for the quality appraisal stage was 19.

Figure 2
Flow chart of the systematic searching strategy



Quality appraisal

The Mixed-Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018) was used to ensure the quality of the selected articles. For each selected study, two screening processes were conducted before proceeding with the quality assessment. Each article was carefully read with a focus on the methodology and analysis sections and then rated against five MMAT criteria. Only articles that met at least three of the five criteria will be included. All assessment decisions were reached by agreement, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Two articles were conceptual papers without primary data and were thus excluded after screening. 14 articles fulfilled all 5 criteria, 2 met 4 criteria, and 1 met 3 criteria. Hence, screening confirmed that 17 were empirical and eligible for full appraisal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study Characteristics

The 17 included studies represented diverse geographic contexts, methodological approaches, and participant populations. Most studies were conducted in the United States (12), with the remaining 5 distributed across Ireland, China, Singapore, Türkiye, and Australia (Table 3). This geographic distribution indicates that early-career support for special educators is of international research interest.

Publication years ranged from 2019 to 2024, with 2019 (n=1), 2020 (n=3), 2021 (n=5), 2022 (n=1), 2023 (n=5), 2024 (n=2). This distribution shows persistent research attention to the topic throughout the review period. There are a variety of methodological approaches in these 17 studies. 11

studies employed qualitative methods, six quantitative methods, and one a mixed-methods approach. This pattern of methodological diversity strengthens confidence in findings that appear consistently across different research designs.

Participants also varied in their pathways to special education teaching. Some studies focused exclusively on alternatively certified teachers (n=3), others on traditionally certified teachers (n=4), and most included teachers from numerous certification pathways (n=10). Teaching contexts are also diverse, such as self-contained special education classrooms, resource rooms, co-teaching arrangements, and itinerant positions supporting students across multiple schools. Years of teaching experience ranged from first-year teachers only (n=7) to teachers within their first three years (n=10). This reflects recognition of this period as the most critical for retention and the most intensive in terms of support needs.

Table 3
Studies characteristics

Author (year)	Country	Design
Siuty (2019)	US	Qualitative
Chen et al. (2020)	China	Quantitative
Hester et al. (2020)	US	Mixed-method
Mintz et al. (2020)	Ireland	Quantitative
Chapman et al. (2021)	US	Qualitative
Francis et al. (2021)	US	Qualitative
MacMath et al. (2021)	US	Qualitative
Teo (2021)	Singapore	Quantitative
Woulfin and Jones (2021)	US	Qualitative
Strom and Martin (2022)	US	Qualitative
Harper et al. (2023)	US	Quantitative
Liang and Zhang (2023)	Australia	Qualitative
Macedonia et al. (2023)	US	Qualitative
Mackey et al. (2023)	US	Qualitative
Rakap & Balikci (2023)	Turkiye	Quantitative
Burke et al. (2024)	US	Quantitative
Chase (2024)	US	Qualitative

Types of Support Provided (Research Question 1)

Across the selected studies, the support provided comprised diverse components addressing multiple aspects of teacher development and well-being. Support types were initially coded using Eisenschmidt's three domains as a deductive framework to organize the findings.

Professional Support: Beyond Generic Teacher Development

All studies described support targeting professional development, though the specific components and quality varied substantially. The most common professional support were 1) Specialized pedagogical training (n=15), 2) Behavior management support (n=14), 3) Legal compliance and documentation training (n=13), 4) Curriculum and instruction adaptation training (n=12), 5) Observation and feedback (n=11), 6) Family communication and partnership training (n=10), and 7) Collaborative teaching strategies (n=9).

New special educators are responsible for learning both general teaching skills and specialized practices simultaneously, which can leave them feeling overwhelmed during induction. Several studies reported that they often feel unprepared for the legal and administrative demands of the job (Teo, 2021; Woulfin & Jones, 2021). This situation suggests that the pre-service programs they attended did not prepare them for the regulatory complexity of special education, and induction programs must address these gaps directly. In addition, this study found that the syllabi they undergo in their pre-service programs should be reviewed and re-examined.

Next, this study found that observation and feedback are more helpful when they are clearly developmental, because teachers learn more when they do not feel judged (Bell et al., 2022; Rakap & Balikci, 2023). However, many induction programs neglect key areas such as family communication, partnership skills, and co-teaching, even though special educators regularly face distressed families, and at the same time, need to navigate challenging relationships with mainstream teachers.

Overall, the findings show that professional support must go far beyond common teacher development for special educators. New special educators need systematic training that addresses the realities of their role, including specialized instruction, legal compliance, complex paperwork, and collaborative demands, to reduce the heightened stress and uncertainty that contribute to attrition (Billingsley et al., 2020; Hester et al., 2020). Effective professional support creates a safe space for practice, strengthens competence across specialized tasks, and ensures they receive structured, job-embedded help that matches the actual complexity of their work.

Social Support: Addressing Professional Isolation

All studies described support addressing social integration and relationship development, though the quality and comprehensiveness varied. The most common social supports found in this review were 1) Mentoring relationships (n=16 studies), 2) Collaborative professional communities (n=12 studies), 3) Administrative support (n=14 studies), 4) Peer collaboration and networking beyond formal mentoring (n=11 studies), and 5) Cross-disciplinary team collaboration (n=8 studies).

Mentoring remains central to induction, but special educators benefit most from mentors with genuine special education expertise. These mentors understand disability-specific interventions, IEP requirements, and the systems new teachers must navigate, knowledge that general mentors often lack. Strong mentoring systems also require training, protected time, and clear structures; informal buddy arrangements, while emotionally supportive, rarely provide the depth of development they need. Administrative support can shape the working environment, determining whether teachers feel overwhelmed or supported. When principals set reasonable workloads, respond to needs, and advocate for special education, new teachers stay longer. Across the included studies, the importance of specialised, knowledgeable mentoring is consistently emphasised (Albert et al., 2023; Bell et al., 2022; Shanks et al., 2022).

Social support also helps prevent the isolation common in special education roles (MacMath et al., 2021). Because many special educators work across settings or have fragmented schedules, intentional inclusion in team meetings, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and school-wide planning becomes essential. Peer networks and collaborative structures expand access to expertise beyond the mentor relationship. At the same time, many teachers felt unprepared for cross-disciplinary teamwork, signalling that collaboration skills must be taught explicitly rather than assumed (Dillon et al., 2021; Mackey et al., 2023). Overall, social support must be deliberate, structured, and inclusive to counteract isolation and build strong professional relationships.

Personal Support: Addressing the Emotional Demands

Support addressing personal well-being and adaptation appeared in all 17 studies, though this domain received less explicit attention in program descriptions than professional or social support. This study found that the five most common personal supports, which are 1) Emotional support and validation were described in 15 studies, 2) Stress management and self-care support appeared in 10 studies, 3) Workload management support was emphasized in 13 studies, 4) Professional identity development was discussed in 9 studies, and 5) Self-efficacy building appeared in 11 studies.

Personal support acknowledges the emotional weight of special education work, yet many programs still treat teacher well-being as secondary (Hester et al., 2020). New teachers face intense situations, including challenging behaviors, distressed families, and ethical dilemmas that require validation from people who genuinely understand the work. Generic encouragement does not help when the realities are far more demanding than in general education. Emotional support strengthens teachers' sense of competence, especially during moments when they question whether they can continue in the profession (Chen et al., 2020).

Stress management, self-care, and workload protection are essential parts of personal support but often receive inconsistent attention. Effective programs actively intervene to help teachers set boundaries and manage responsibilities, rather than simply giving time-management tips. Without this protection, new teachers easily become overwhelmed. Supporting teachers as they develop a strong professional identity and confidence helps them stay motivated despite the challenges (Chen et al., 2020). When teachers build a clear sense of purpose and see models of experienced educators who remain committed, they become more resilient, better equipped to handle difficulties, and more likely to remain in the field (Jackson & Parker, 2023).

3.3 Alignment with Eisenschmidt's Framework (Research Question 2)

Findings showed strong support for the framework's fundamental structure while also identifying essential components and extensions. No studies described programs that fell entirely outside the three-domain structure. This finding held across diverse national contexts, educational structures, and program designs, supporting the framework's international applicability.

However, each domain or support varied substantially across studies and programs. All of the studies mention professional development in induction programs, followed by social support, specifically mentoring, which received extensive attention, even though its implementation was not explicitly specified. Finally, personal support received the slightest mention in studies. It is frequently discussed, but not much on the specific strategies.

Major extensions are needed to apply this framework in special education because, compared to mainstream education, each domain demands far more specialized and intensive support. For instance, professional development must include IEP writing, disabilities-specific instruction, legal compliance, and behavior management. Guidance on working with families under stress should be provided by social support, by other related service providers, and by paraprofessionals (if needed), not merely by colleagues. While for personal support, emotional intensity in the work must be addressed, including secondary trauma and ethical dilemmas that mainstream teachers barely face. These are not

minor modifications. They need expertise, sufficient resources, and targeted structures that general inductions cannot provide.

This review also illustrates that global contexts shape how these supports are delivered. While every teacher needs professional, social, and personal support, the delivery methods must fit local realities. Rural areas use regional and digital mentoring, low-resource systems rely on peer networks, and collectivist cultures structure mentoring differently from individualist ones. This framework's strength lies in its flexibility. It defines the "what" without locking programs into a single "how." By demonstrating its adaptability across these contexts, the review supports the framework's value as an internationally applicable theory and reinforces the argument that three-domain support in special education is essential rather than optional.

Conclusion

This review confirms that Eisenschmidt's three-domain framework provides a useful lens for understanding what new special educators need in their first years of practice. Programs offering comprehensive support across all three domains were associated with stronger retention and improved teaching quality than those addressing only one or two areas. The evidence also makes clear that special educators face more demanding professional tasks, more complex relationship networks, and greater emotional strain than mainstream teachers. For this reason, their induction programs need deeper specialization and stronger intensity, not just minor adjustments to existing models.

Across contexts, some principles hold that new special educators need strong professional guidance, social integration, and support for personal well-being, and programs that offer all three perform best. However, the implementation must follow local realities. The challenge is balancing commitment to core principles along with flexible delivery. Whether through one-to-one mentoring, peer networks, or creative alternatives in resource-limited settings, the goal remains the same: to provide comprehensive support that matches the actual complexity of special education work and strengthens their ability to stay, grow, and thrive in their role. Though this study is limited to new special educators, its findings point toward clear directions for future research. Future research should move beyond descriptive accounts toward intervention studies that test the three-domain framework directly, longitudinal designs that track retention and well-being beyond the induction year, and studies situated in underrepresented and low-resource contexts, where evidence remains scarce despite the framework's demonstrated adaptability.

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Disclosure statement

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