

Special Education Teachers: What Keeps Them in the Field?

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Abstract: The dilemma of securing a special education teacher supply is a critical issue. Understanding causes of attrition is vital to addressing the problem. This review analyzes literature and identifies factors for teacher retention/attrition while overlaying the concept of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to understand this phenomenon from a psychological perspective.

Between 1992 to 1999, students identified for special education swelled by 20.3%, while the general education population increased by only 6.8% (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). Annually, the federal government appropriates about \$90 million on recruitment of special education teachers for students with disabilities (Brownell, Hirsh, & Seo, 2004). Despite government spending, from 1999 through 2001, there were 28,300 special education teachers who left the field, and 33,000 who moved from their current positions (National Center for Education for Education Statistics, 2000-01). Across the country, 98% of school districts indicated special education teacher shortages; the projected need for these teachers by 2008 exceeds 135,000 (Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education, 2005).

The national dilemma of securing a solid special education teacher supply has become a leading educational policy concern (Allen, 2004). As a result, researchers and legislators have focused on teacher attrition. Persistent turnover is attributed equally between attrition, those who desert the field; and migration, those who transfer to other teaching positions (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Special education crossover rates to general education are 10 times higher than crossover rates from general education to special education (Council for Exceptional Children, 2005). Reasons attributed to teacher attrition and migration includes school personnel staffing issues, teachers' family concerns, and undesirable work environments (Ingersoll, 2003). Understanding reasons teachers abandon special education is important; moreover, it is critical for school districts and administrators to identify and cultivate teacher retention strategies. This paper is divided in two sections: method and discussion of themes. The method section will describe the process used in the structured literature review. The discussion of themes will include a review of literature that identifies (a) causal factors for teacher retention and attrition in special education, (b) ingredients for establishing effective mentoring relationships, and (c) a rationale for teachers' mentoring needs using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Method

The structured literature review consisted of the following process: deciding on keyword descriptors, choosing databases, establishing database search criteria, performing the database searches, choosing relevant articles, and evaluating articles.

Deciding on Keyword Descriptors

The two search descriptors chosen for the database searches were *special education teacher* and *retention*. Although retention is usually discussed within the context of *teacher shortage*, this descriptor was avoided to prevent unrelated articles to special education teachers exclusively. Descriptors from IDEA were chosen for the database search to be combined individually with *special education teacher* and *retention*. These descriptors included *other health impaired, emotionally disturbed, orthopedic impairment, autism, specific learning*

disability, mentally retarded, deaf, speech and language impairment, blind, multiple handicap, developmental delays, deaf and blind, and traumatic brain injury.

Choosing Databases

Six educational databases were selected: ERIC- Education Resource Information Center, Expanded Academic ASAP, Social Sciences Full Text, PsychINFO, Social Science Full Text, and ISI Web of Knowledge.

Establishing Database Search Criteria

Database searches consisting of all types of articles using the previously indicated descriptors were performed. This was done not to exclude information from symposiums, national surveys, and research briefs which might be relevant to our research topic. Database records chosen had to contain reasons contributing to attrition or retention of special education teachers. Search dates were limited to 2000 through 2006 to coincide with the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which put into law that special education teachers must be highly qualified, and may therefore be a factor correlated with teacher retention.

Performing Database Searches

Database searches were conducted on May 31, 2006. Articles associated with teacher retention, programs to support new teachers, and teacher preparation programs were selected for review. The combined database searches yielded 260 hits. The search that resulted in the highest number of hits was Social Sciences (111). Thereafter, the database hits occurred in the following descending order: ERIC (107), PsychINFO (32), Expanded Academic Info (5), ISI Web of Knowledge (4), and Social Sciences Full Text Omni (1). An additional search was performed on June 7, 2006 designed to refine the literature review to determine if one disability was associated with an increased rate of teacher attrition or retention. Students identified in IDEA legislation represent the student population that special education teachers instruct. This search was comprised of IDEA (2004) disability descriptors which included *mental retardation, deaf, blind, orthopedic impairment, other health impaired, emotionally disturbed, specific learning disability, speech and language impairment, mental health, developmental disability, deaf and blind, autism, and traumatic brain injury*. Each word was combined in a Boolean search with the descriptors *special education teacher* and *retention*. However, it should be noted that the second series of searches resulted in no significant hits.

Choosing Relevant Articles

Following the database search, we chose articles germane to our topic, special education and teacher retention. Articles not related specifically to special education and teacher retention were removed from further consideration.

Identifying Themes in the Literature

Recurring themes were reviewed in the literature to determine factors correlated to teacher retention. "A theme is a pattern found in the information that describes and organizes observations" (Rocco, 2003, p. 7). Emerging patterns in the text are then identified, grouped, and condensed to represent the most significant ideas in the research.

Discussion of Themes

The emerging themes included lack of administrative support, overwhelming caseloads and teacher isolation, which continues to contribute to the increasing rates of teacher attrition (Carpenter & Dyal, 2001; Kennedy & Burstein, 2004; Otto & Arnold, 2005). These factors all seem to point to unmet psychological needs in the workplace.

Causal Factors for Teacher Retention and Attrition in Special Education

Evidence suggests that overwhelming caseloads continue to exacerbate the retention problem in the field of special education (Russ, Chiang, Rylance, & Bongers, 2001). When one feels overwhelmed by work, it leads to feelings of stress. People generally avoid stress because it creates a psychological imbalance that affects optimal functioning (Kaplan & Sadock, 1998). If less time were devoted to paperwork, teachers and support personnel could spend more time designing quality lessons and programs that are aimed to remediate rather than compensate. Special education paperwork is becoming increasingly difficult to manage. Special education teachers are frustrated by both the amount and nature of the paperwork required (Haser & Nasser, 2003).

Induction programs are a structured form of support for beginning educators. Teachers who participate in induction programs are more committed, having higher satisfaction with their jobs; therefore they are more likely to remain in the profession (Kennedy and Burstein, 2004). It is widely accepted that people who feel supported have a sense of psychological well being, increase their productivity, and have a higher likelihood of being motivated (Ormrod, 2006). Therefore, induction programs should be designed according to the needs and characteristics of different groups of educators, keeping psychological factors in mind. A teacher induction program can help new teachers improve practice, learn professional responsibilities and ultimately positively affect student learning (Wong, 2002). Induction programs also have the potential of elevating the teaching profession and fostering a collaborative learning community for all educators. Good induction practices, including mentoring, will increase teacher effectiveness, improve student achievement and retain teachers in the profession. More experienced teachers mentoring less experienced teachers has become a relatively common practice in many states and school districts, particularly as a part of induction programs for new teachers (Westling & Duffy, 2003).

Ingredients for Establishing Effective Mentoring Relationships

The literature illustrates an effort to decrease negative aspects of mentoring by outlining necessary ingredients for establishing effective mentoring relationships. A definition of the mentoring relationship offered by Amos (2005) combined with new teacher insights and corroboration in the literature for this framework will be presented.

Amos (2005) applies a journalistic definition of the mentoring relationship by using the five W's of (a) Who? (b) When? (c) Where? (d) What? and (e) Why? to set parameters. "Who" refers to a competent, experienced, professional special educator possessing a global understanding of all aspects of special education related to instruction, laws, curriculum, resources, and district policies (Amos, 2005). Professionalism of the mentor is an important piece of the mentor relationship. Building relationships that allow for growth and return on investment allows a district to grow and become a solid support system for both novice and veteran teachers alike.

The second question, "When," corresponds to the time factor which comprises mentor availability for one-on-one communication opportunities and provision of emotional support to the mentee (Amos, 2005). A correlation between frequency of mentor contact and the perception of mentor effectiveness was found in one South Carolina study on mentoring (Whitaker, 2000a). Likewise, six school districts in the Georgia Systematic Teacher Education Program who surveyed new teachers in 2003 and 2004 discovered that new teachers wanted the opportunity observe their more experienced colleagues; this finding supports national surveys on the same subject (Gilbert, 2005).

The third question of “Where” means the proximity of the mentor to the mentee, which would preferably be in the same school to facilitate modeling and observation opportunities (Amos, 2005). The administration needs to ensure that the mentor has time and coverage to observe and meet with the mentee throughout the school year to provide continuous professional development to the novice teacher. Professional development of special educators must include the component of collaboration with experienced teachers (Carpenter & Dyal, 2001). Many districts understand that having a mentor in the special education field is important, but they are not always able to assign a teacher at the same school. An innovative strategy dealing with the dilemma of the need to assign a special education mentor from another school has been to also assign a co-mentor at the beginning teachers’ school campus. Other forms of support through e-mail and the telephone can be used to supplement communication when direct contact cannot be made.

Principal or administrative support also play a very important role in the retention of special education teachers to help reduce the frustrations the teacher feels. When special educators feel their administrator engages in meaningful, substantive conversations with them, they do not feel as isolated from the other teachers (Otto & Arnold, 2005). Administrators must be familiar with available resources to support the diverse needs of students, families and staff and must know how to access additional support to ensure appropriate education for all students and support for all teachers.

If schools are to succeed in retaining teachers, proper infrastructure should be in place that allows teachers to focus most of their time and energy on teaching. With this in mind, school leaders should give new teachers less of a workload, and fewer responsibilities so they can concentrate on their students. Induction programs typically provide an array of supports to facilitate the transition into teaching (Boyer & Gillespie, 2002). Teachers who participate in induction programs are more committed and satisfied with their jobs and more likely to remain in the profession (Kennedy & Burstein, 2004).

“What” involves a mentor program that is structured, but affords flexibility for the mentor and mentee to determine meeting times and topics to be addressed (Amos, 2005). Mentors should be able to maintain regular contact with new teachers, and a shared planning time provides needed support for the new teacher (Whitaker, 2000b). Mentors can also help new teachers in finding scarce classroom supplies or classroom resources as most novice teachers enter the classroom with only a handful of lesson plans that were written in college and little else. Novice teachers should be able to use the mentor as a sounding board for ideas as well as someone they can aspire to become.

Lastly, “Why” focuses on the correlation between good mentoring and special education teacher retention. Experienced teachers may have instructional expertise, but the ability to self-assess, defining good teaching, and to talk to colleagues in an unbiased manner is critical to developing good mentors. Since many new teachers have little confidence in their ability to effectively manage a classroom, mentoring these new teachers not only gives them the extra training and confidence that they need but may also help district retention of novice teachers.

A Rationale for Teachers’ Mentoring Needs Using Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Emerging themes in our literature review of special education teacher retention appeared to have one overriding commonality: teachers’ psychological needs. Simply put, when psychological needs were met, teachers were more likely to stay. However, when psychological needs went unmet, teachers were more likely to leave. It was decided that interlocking Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs* with uncovered themes in the literature would result in peeling away the

layers of complexity surrounding the special education teacher retention challenge. Therefore, themes related to administrative support, mentoring, induction and retention will be placed in the psychological context of Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* (Kaplan & Sadock, 1998). Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* (1998) outlines five levels of need: the first four categories include deficiency needs, and the fifth category defines the need for growth. This section will define the five categories of Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* (1998) fitting relevant items from each theme into corresponding levels of the hierarchy.

Physiological needs comprise the first level of need in the hierarchy. This level consists of needs related to biological functions like breathing, eating, sleeping, and regulation of body temperature. Safety needs, which are dependent on physiological needs being met, are listed on the second level of the hierarchy. Love/belonging needs, which is Maslow's third level, comprise social relatedness, acceptance and inclusion in the larger community.

Beginning teachers especially need to feel supported by peers and administration to build the fourth level of Maslow's hierarchy, self esteem. Special educators feel that when their administrator engages in meaningful, substantive conversations with them, they are not as isolated from other teachers (Otto & Arnold, 2005). This support allows the novice teacher to feel safe and confident in his or her role. It is clear that mentoring/induction programs help to provide social relatedness by allowing for growth of new and veteran teachers.

However, in our society, especially in the field of education, it has been assumed that a teacher's sense of self-worth can be developed from a sense of personal achievement that is independent of the teacher's sense of belonging. If we concur with Maslow, however, we see that self-worth can arise only when an individual is grounded in community, in our case a school. Teachers in the field of special education benefit from induction programs and guidance from veteran teachers. A sense of belonging is needed for teachers to stay committed to the field. This sense of belongingness will evolve into a more confident and committed teacher. Ultimately, when teachers reach the last level of Maslow's hierarchy, self-actualization, their need for supports decreases because they are able to problem solve, exerting their professional and knowledge creatively with confidence.

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