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ABSTRACT

Students earning a Master's Degree in Special Education in 1985 at West Virginia University were surveyed concerning their job satisfaction and their teacher training programs. The majority of the 54 respondents found special education to be a personally satisfying career and believed that their individual efforts made a difference. However, many felt less than prepared for the stresses associated with their teaching positions and that they would select another profession if given the opportunity to begin again. Barely a third planned to remain in the field until retirement. The stress-training correlation varied depending upon the categorical training and teaching area involved, such as behavior disorders, learning disabilities, mentally impairments, or severe and profound handicaps. The apparent contradiction in the expressions of job satisfaction with plans to leave the profession are attributed to factors external to the special education teacher's control, such as discipline, recordkeeping, and relationships with administrators. In order to retain special education teachers, it is suggested that teacher training programs place added emphasis on the following areas: adapting curriculum to meet individual students' needs, teaching strategies, and classroom management. It is also recommended that training programs better prepare teachers to handle job stress factors. (JDD)

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"Rural Special Education Teachers Respond
to Satisfaction with Jobs and Training Programs"

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Abstract

A survey of recent graduates of special education programs was conducted in one of the country's more rural states, West Virginia. Results indicated that overall many respondents felt less than prepared for the stresses associated with their teaching positions. However the stress-training correlation varied depending upon the categorical training and teaching areas of behavior disorders, learning disabilities, mentally impaired, or severely and profoundly handicapped. Remedial suggestions are presented for consideration.

Rural Special Education Teachers Respond to Satisfaction with Jobs and Training Programs

250,000 special education teachers are employed in schools throughout the United States with 25,000 new teachers joining their ranks each year. However, a 6% attrition rate decreases the total number entering to 10,000 teaching positions (Ysseldyke and Algozzine 1982). This rate is even greater in many of our rural states such as West Virginia. Shapiro states that the problem facing education today is not how to attract bright individuals to the teaching profession but, how to retain them after they enter the profession (NEA NOW 11-4-85). An interesting NEA poll of teachers reported that many teachers would not become teachers if they were starting their careers over again and that only 60% planned to remain in education until retirement (Farber & Miller 1981).

The above statements reflect a serious problem for those who train and those who employ special education teachers. Federal and state mandates require schools to provide education for all school age individuals with special needs but, where will we get the special education teachers necessary to teach these students? Burnout, low salaries, and discipline problems are often attributed to the personnel problem. Other factors include student-staff ratio, work overload, lack of perceived teaching success, program structure, relationships with administrators, inadequate teacher preparation, isolation, and lack of appropriate classrooms, equipment, and materials. Fimian and Blanton (1986) suggest that we need to examine how teachers can consciously prepare for these situations.

Preventive measures need to be addressed by the system as well as the individual teacher. One area which holds promise is in teacher preparation. Prospective special education teachers must receive realistic knowledge of the type of emotional stress their profession entails and be trained in coping strategies to deflect this stress. Training programs investing in such strategies would need to include proactive stress, burnout identification, and management practices at more than a lecture level alone (Fimian & Blanton, 1986). In an effort to follow this suggestion, a survey was conducted of all students earning a Master's Degree in Special Education during the 1985 year at West Virginia University.

Survey

The three part survey consisted of four general information questions, seven questions addressing job satisfaction, and nine questions evaluating their teacher training programs. The sample was mailed directly to the graduate's private residence and returned to a fellow graduate student to ensure privacy and freedom of response without personal or professional liability concerns. Fifty-four (44%) of the one hundred twenty-two 1985 master degree candidates responded. Results were calculated as an entire group and individually for the certification areas of behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, mental retardation, and severe/profound handicaps.

General information responses found that 29% of these special educators had educational backgrounds of MA + 15 or higher and that 74% had been in the profession for four to ten years when surveyed.

Inquiries made in terms of job satisfaction resulted in the following findings: (see Table 1 for categorical differences)

- 88% found teaching in special education to be a satisfying career.
- 94% believe that their individual teaching efforts make a difference.
- 48% would select another profession if beginning a career now.
- 37% would leave teaching if offered a position outside of special education with at least equivalent salary.
- 35% plan to continue teaching special education until retirement.
- 64% stated that special educators receive more than their share of discipline problems.
- 42% feel isolated as a special educator within the regular school setting.
- The three job components that were considered to be major sources of stress were extensive record keeping (64%), discipline (57%), and relationships with administrators (50%).

Evaluating their teacher training programs revealed the following information: (see Table 2 for categorical differences)

- 57% had in-classroom experience in addition to student teaching.
- 72% stated that there should be more in-classroom experience required during training.
- 53% felt that they were adequately prepared for their first teaching assignment.
- Given the subject areas of classroom management, assessment procedures, teaching strategies, data collection procedures, due process procedures, adapting curriculum to meet individual student's needs, and communication with parents, those surveyed were requested to rate the effectiveness of their training in each area and to prioritize those areas that required more emphasis during training. Assessment procedures, teaching strategies, data collection

procedures, and due process procedures received the highest ratings with assessment procedures ranked first and communication with parents ranked last. Curricula areas needing increased emphasis during teacher training were (1) adapting curriculum to meet individual student's needs, (2) teaching strategies, and (3) classroom management.

- 59% were satisfied with the quality of their teacher training.

The majority of 1985 Master Degree candidates in Special Education were experienced special education teachers. In West Virginia most found teaching special education to be personally satisfying career and that their individual efforts make a difference. However, many of this same group expressed a belief that they would select another profession if given the opportunity to begin again. Barely a third of them plan to remain in the field until retirement. These statements support the findings of Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1982), Shapiro (1985), Farber and Miller (1981).

There appears to be a contradiction in such statements. How can one believe that their individual efforts make a difference and that teaching is satisfying yet plan to leave the profession? Perhaps, one needs to examine internal and external factors involved in teaching special education. A special education teacher has internal controls in determining students' curriculum content, teaching strategies, and learning styles thereby, able to clearly observe their individual impact upon the students' learning and receive personal satisfaction for their efforts. Conversely, when addressing discipline, record keeping, isolation within a school, and relationships with administrators external factors beyond the special educator's control (and many times without his input) exert influence. Under optimal

circumstances, where administrators lead the cooperative effort to provide a positive learning environment for every student, special education teachers are contributing members of the educational team at every level. Therefore, feelings of isolation are reduced along with the perception of being solely responsible for discipline, record keeping, and program implementation. The educational system has opened it's doors to special education from gifted programs to programs for those severe/profoundly handicapped but, is special education a part of the whole or an addition to the whole?

How can these talented and valuable special education teachers be kept in the classroom? Literature suggests increased financial opportunities, improved facilities, increased involvement with administration, and better teacher preparation programs. Our survey requested more in-classroom experiences in teacher training programs with added emphasis in the content areas of (1) adapting curriculum to meet individual student's needs, (2) teaching strategies, and (3) classroom management. A comparison of job stress factors with teacher preparation resulted in these additional findings (see Table 3 for categorical differences).

- 24% felt unprepared for stress factors associated with discipline
- 16% perceived themselves as inadequately prepared for stress factors related to parent conferences
- 25% believed they were unprepared for the stresses occurred from attending required meetings
- 64% felt extensive record keeping was stressful with 29% poorly prepared for the stress
- 25% indicated they were in need of more assistance in developing less stressful relationships with regular teachers

- 29% of the teachers considered themselves ill prepared for handling stress factors associated with mainstreaming
- 42% perceived a greater need for preparation in developing less stressful relationships with administrators.

In summary, the problem of keeping special education teachers in the classroom is a problem for all facets of education but of particular concern in our rural states. The resolution must be addressed by the entire system with special education teachers trained to assess and identify factors detrimental to their effectiveness in the classroom. They must be equipped with coping mechanisms to provide for their continued professional growth. These essentials need to be integrated into special education teacher training programs as well as supported by the educational community. Teacher training programs must eliminate the disparity between perceived stress and preparation for handling this stress. Additional detailed studies need to be implemented in order to delineate training needs and procedures to integrate them into a special education teacher's repertoire of professional skills.

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West Virginia Special Education Teachers Respond to Job and Training Programs (Donaldson/Lombardi)

TABLE I

JOB SATISFACTION (54/122) 44% 1985 M.Ed's in Sp. Ed.

QUESTIONS	YES					NO				
	BD(4)	LD(32)	MI(-)	SPH(14)	Total(54)	BD(4)	LD(32)	MI(4)	SPH(14)	Total(54)
1. Is teaching in special education a satisfactory career for you?	75%	87%	100%	92%	88%	--	12%	--	7%	9%
2. Did you believe that your individual teaching efforts make differences?	100%	90%	100%	100%	94%	--	6%	--	--	3%
3. Would you select another profession if you were beginning your career now?	50%	43%	75%	50%	48%	50%	56%	25%	42%	48%
4. If offered a position outside special education with at least equivalent salary, would you leave teaching?	50%	46%	--	21%	37%	50%	46%	75%	71%	55%
5. Do you plan to continue teaching special education until you retire?		37%	25%	42%	35%	100%	43%	50%	50%	50%
6. Do special educators receive more than their share of discipline problems?	50%	62%	50%	78%	64%	50%	28%	25%	7%	24%
7. Do you feel isolated as a special educator within the regular school setting?	50%	50%	25%	28%	42%	50%	34%	75%	21%	35%

West Virginia Special Education Teachers Respond to Job and Training Programs (Donaldson/Lombardi)

TABLE 2

TEACHERS TRAINING

QUESTIONS	YES					NO				
	BD(4)	LD(32)	MI(4)	SPH(14)	Total(54)	BD(4)	LD(32)	MI(4)	SPH(14)	Total(54)
1. Did your educational program provide for in-classroom experience other than student teaching?	50%	40%	75%	85%	57%	50%	50%	25%	14%	38%
2. Should there be more in-classroom experience required?	75%	15%	50%	71%	72%	25%	12%	50%	28%	20%
3. Should the following areas be emphasized more during training:										
a. classroom management	75%	78%	50%	57%	70%	--	21%	50%	35%	25%
b. assessment procedures	50%	46%	25%	35%	42%	--	50%	75%	50%	48%
c. teaching strategies	75%	81%	25%	64%	72%	--	15%	75%	28%	22%
d. data collection procedures	75%	43%	25%	35%	42%	--	53%	75%	50%	50%
e. due process procedures	100%	40%	--	28%	38%	--	56%	100%	57%	55%
f. adapting curriculum to meet individual needs	75%	84%	50%	64%	75%	--	12%	50%	28%	18%
g. communicating with parents	100%	68%	50%	71%	61%	--	25%	50%	50%	31%
4. Were you adequately prepared for your first teaching assignment?	--	46%	100%	71%	53%	100%	46%	--	28%	42%
5. Were you satisfied with the quality of your teacher training program?	25%	56%	75%	71%	59%	75%	43%	--	21%	37%

West Virginia Special Education Teachers Respond to Job and Training Programs (Donaldson/Lombardi)

TABLE 3

JOB STRESS vs TEACHER TRAINING

QUESTIONS	YES					NO				
	BD(4)	LD(32)	MI(4)	SPH(14)	Total(54)	BD(4)	LD(32)	MI(4)	SPH(14)	Total(54)
1. Are any of the identified stress factors for special educators listed below a source of stress to you?										
a. discipline	75%	53%	100%	50%	57%	25%	43%	--	42%	38%
b. parent conferences	25%	31%	--	21%	25%	75%	68%	100%	71%	72%
c. required meetings (SBAT, PAC, IEP)	50%	50%	--	21%	38%	50%	50%	100%	78%	61%
d. extensive record keeping (IEP, DATA)	75%	71%	50%	50%	64%	25%	28%	50%	50%	35%
e. relationship with regular teachers	25%	43%	25%	14%	33%	75%	53%	75%	64%	59%
f. mainstreaming	75%	50%	50%	21%	44%	25%	50%	50%	64%	51%
g. relationship with administrators	50%	50%	25%	57%	50%	50%	50%	75%	42%	50%
2. Did your teacher training prepare you to cope with any of the above stressors that you have identified with in your profession?										
a. discipline	--	25%	--	35%	24%	75%	28%	25%	7%	25%
b. parent conferences	--	6%	--	21%	9%	25%	25%	--	--	16%
c. required meetings	25%	9%	--	7%	9%	--	68%	--	14%	25%
d. extensive record keeping	25%	31%	--	42%	31%	50%	68%	25%	7%	29%
e. relationship with regular teachers	--	6%	--	--	3%	25%	34%	--	14%	25%
f. mainstreaming	--	18%	--	7%	12%	75%	31%	25%	14%	29%
g. relationship with administrators	--	3%	--	7%	3%	50%	43%	--	50%	42%

