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ABSTRACT

This study investigated reasons reported by elementary and junior high school teachers of students with mental retardation for continuing to work in the field of special education. The study thus sought to identify factors that might be helpful in finding ways to reduce the turnover rate of this population of teachers in Taiwan. Interviews with 27 senior teachers, each with more than 10 years of teaching experience, concluded that: (1) the most important personal factors in maintaining the involvement of senior teachers in long-term education of students with mental retardation were teachers' interests, ideals, and willingness; (2) the factor of religion was ranked the second most important personal factor; (3) the most important environmental factor was obtaining enough supports; and (4) other important environmental factors were conditions of educational settings, student characteristics, and job transfer difficulty. (Contains 16 references.) (JDD)

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# Correlates of Long-term Services Among Senior Teachers of the Mentally Retarded

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# **Correlates of Long-term Services Among Senior Teachers of the Mentally Retarded**

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## **Abstract**

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the reasons for long-term services of senior teachers working with the mentally retarded. The interview guide developed in the study was used to conduct focused interview with 27 senior teachers educating the mentally retarded. The data collected from interviews were treated by the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. The conclusions drawn from the study are as follows: (1) The most important personal factors to have the senior teachers involving in long-term education of the mentally retarded were their interests, ideals, and willingnesses; (2) The most important environmental factor to have the senior teachers involving in long-term education of the mentally retarded was obtaining enough supports.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The implementation of the Special Education Act and strong support from the government have expedited the development of special education in the Republic of China on Taiwan in recent

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This paper was part of the study "career development of senior teachers working with the mentally retarded" (Ho, 1992).

years. As a result, the increasing needs of special educators are evident. On the other hand, the high turnover rate of teachers working with the mentally retarded has been the focus of concern in the field of special education for years (Tsai, 1985).

Nevertheless, the studies of Ho (1989, 1991) have indicated that approximately 18% of teachers working with the mentally retarded have more than 10 years of services in teaching mentally handicapped children. The commitment of this special group of teachers is worth our attention. If we could understand the factors related to long-term services of this senior teacher group, it might be helpful to find the ways to reduce the turnover rate of teachers working with the mentally retarded.

The understanding of factors in regard to long-term services of teachers is one aspect of career development research. The studies related to career development of teachers are not many. Most studies of teachers' career development focused on professional development process. Certain stages of a teaching career were identified by some studies (e.g., Unruh & Turner, 1970; Gregorc, 1973; Watts, 1980; Burden, 1981; McDonald, 1982). Generally speaking, a progressive teaching career was found by these studies. Before reaching a stage of mastery, most teachers might experience some developmental phases such as survival, adjustment, and growing stages. However, interindividual differences in career development process among teachers seem existent. These differences may result from variant factors influencing career development. Thus, it is desirable to understand factors contributing to teachers' career development.

The literature related to factors influencing career development of teachers is limited at the present time. Most studies in this area pertain to investigation of teacher stress and job satisfaction

(Pelsma, Richard, Harrington, & Burry, 1987). The variables found to have relationships with teacher's career development include environment (Burden, 1981; DeMoulin & Guyton, 1988) teacher willingness (Pucel, Jensrud, & Persico, 1987), motivation (Wittkamper & Harris, 1987), and demographic factors such as age, sex, education, teaching experience and so on (Lin, 1989; Pelsma et al., 1987; Cohen, 1982; Tsai, 1985). These research results were nearly derived from career development studies of regular class teachers. No published studies directly associated with career development of teachers educating the mentally retarded could be found at the present time. The purpose of this study was specifically intended to investigate the correlates of long-term services among senior teachers of the mentally retarded. A qualitative study through intensive interviews was conducted to collect necessary data in order to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the personal factors resulting in the long-term services of senior teachers working with the mentally retarded?
2. What are the environmental factors resulting in the long-term services of senior teachers working with the mentally retarded?

## **METHOD**

The intensive interview approach was employed in this study in order to collect teachers' perception data in relation to their long-term services in educating the mentally retarded. A list of 27 senior teachers working with the mentally retarded, 16 from junior high and 11 from elementary schools, was identified through a systematic sampling method from the study sample of Ho (1991).

These participants, 4 males and 23 females, all have taught special classes for the mentally retarded for more than 10 years. They were between ages of 37-65 and from different schools. The teachers ranged in teaching mentally retarded students from 12 to 20 years.

The data collection instrument was a semistructured interview guide. This interview guide included two primary questions. The primary questions served as a topical initiating point of discussion. In addition, some incidental probes were also used to draw out additional specific information.

Interviews were conducted at the home schools of the 27 participants. Each interview was audiorecorded and transcribed. From the transcription key phrases or sentences were extracted, coded by the participant's number and copied on cards. The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis proposed by Glaser (1965) was used to analyze the interview data. Glaser described the constant comparative method as the following stages: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory. Thus, this method involved the comparison of the ideas which were coded into each research question and the determination of topical categories. The results of the study were derived from the analysis and interpretation of topical categories found in this study.

## **RESULTS**

The responses of 27 senior teachers working with the mentally retarded to reasons for long-term services could be categorized into personal and environmental dimensions. Different teachers may have

different reasons for their long-term services but all reasons are within either personal or environmental area.

The most important personal factor which the teachers revealed for their long-term services was that related to an individual's interest, ideal, and willingness (n=10; 37%). The factor of religion was placed at the second rank (n=6; 22.2%). Other personal factors mentioned by the teachers included personality suitability (n=3; 11.1%), unwillingness to transfer job (n=3; 11.1%), health factors (n=2; 7.4%), teaching achievement (n=2; 7.4%), meaningfulness of teaching (n=2; 7.4%), previous working experiences with the handicapped (n=1; 3.7%), earning special education credits (n=1; 3.7%), and motivation to involve oneself in research (n=1; 3.7%). From the expressed perceptions of the senior teachers, we could understand that the factors associated with an individual's ideal, interest, willingness, belief, and so on seem to be significant contributors to his/her long-term service in education of the mentally retarded. Other personal factors still have specific meanings for some teachers to involve themselves in long-term services.

As to the environmental factors, "obtaining enough supports" was deemed to be the most important influence on long-term services of senior teachers working with the mentally retarded. Other environmental factors such as "conditions of educational settings", "student characteristics", and "job transfer difficulty" also received much attention. Within the factor of "obtaining enough supports", various responses such as family support (n=11; 40.7%), good colleague relationship (n=9; 33.3%), school support (n=6; 22.2%), parental support (n=3; 11.1%), feedback from students (n=3; 11.1%), support to special education (n=1; 3.7%), and influence from church (n=1; 3.7%) were presented. The conditions of educational settings might consist of the following phenomena: small student load and

no entrance examination pressure (n=4; 14.8%), flexible curriculum (n=1; 3.7%), more leisure time (n=1; 3.7%), less teaching pressure (n=1; 3.7%), less student work reading (n=1; 3.7%), no connection with regular class (n=1; 3.7%), and simplicity of educational environment (n=1; 3.7%). The student characteristics mean simplicity, obedience, and loveliness of mentally retarded students (n=7; 25.9%). As for job transfer difficulty (n=5; 18.5%), though it seemed to be a negative factor, it was also an influential force for some teachers to work with the mentally retarded for longer time. Among the various environmental factors, sufficient supports for teachers of the mentally retarded seem more essential for their long-term services than others. However, other environmental factors still have unique relationships to long-term services of specific teachers working with the mentally retarded.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation suggest that the correlates of long-term services among senior teachers of the mentally retarded are not necessarily consistent. In addition, the teachers may have multiple reasons to result in their long-term services in education of the mentally retarded. In other words, each senior teacher of the mentally retarded seems to have a unique career development process. Thus, the career guidance program for teachers of the mentally retarded should be quite individualized. It is necessary to better understand teachers' perceptions related to education of the mentally retarded in order to provide them adequate assistance in career development.

Generally speaking, the factors associated with an individual's ideal, interest, willingness, and belief, and with environmental



supports appear to be fundamental influences on long-term services of teachers working with the mentally retarded. In other words, the self-related psychological factors and the supports from educational milieu are very important to career development of teachers working with the mentally retarded. These findings seem to be on the same side of Burden (1981), DeMoulin & Guyton (1988), Pucel, Jensrud, & Persico (1987), and Wittkamper & Harris (1987). The importance of teacher willingness and environmental support should have implications for teacher trainers and educational administrators. On the one hand, the interest and willingness should be emphasized in the selection and preparation of teachers working with the mentally retarded. On the other hand, the educational administration also should provide enough supports in teaching and guidance to teachers working with the mentally retarded in order to reinforce the continuity of their teaching career.

Among the Correlates of long-term services found in this study, "job transfer difficulty" should receive special attention. It seems to raise a question that if the high turnover rate of teachers working with the mentally retarded in some regions or schools results from "job transfer easiness". If so, then it is necessary to review and improve the existing job transfer regulations and to provide some needed administrative support programs in order to retain the incumbent teachers of the mentally retarded.

In summary, the responses of senior teachers working with the mentally retarded to the reasons of long-term services may give many implications to the high turnover rate of teachers educating the mentally retarded. The correlates of long-term services among senior teachers of the mentally retarded found in this study are worth the attention of teacher trainers and educational administrators. The senior teachers interviewed in the study seemed

to have suggested the ways to reduce the turnover rate of teachers working with the mentally retarded.

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