Involuntary Teacher Transfer in Special Education: Concepts and Strategies for Teachers Facing New Assignments

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Abstract

Special education teachers are more likely than general education teachers to experience involuntary transfers to new teaching assignments. Faced with the challenge of teaching students with disabilities they have not encountered before, at new grade or developmental levels, among unfamiliar colleagues in new settings, special educators may experience anxiety and respond with resistance. But there are steps teachers can take to minimize the stress of an unwelcome transfer. This article helps teachers view the transition to a new position as a process that can be understood and managed. Three distinct phases in the transition process are explained and illustrated with an extended case example. Strategies for managing each phase of the transition are offered.

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To Elena, the transfer seemed to come out of nowhere. She had been happy as a special class teacher for young children with intellectual disabilities and took pride in her students' progress. She knew that her efforts were appreciated by the students' families and by the principal, who routinely stopped by her classroom whenever he gave VIP visitors a tour. So when the director of special education told her that she was being transferred to the high school to teach in the learning resource center, Elena was stunned.

Involuntary transfers to a new teaching position can be very upsetting, especially when teachers have not been involved in the decision-making process leading to the reassignment. Boe and his colleagues (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook & Barkanic, 1998; Boe, Cook & Sunderland, 2008) examined data from four rounds of the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS 1990-91, 1993-94, 1999-00, and the most recent available, 2003-04) and found that special educators are more likely than general educators to experience the major change of a transfer to a new school, and that more than half of such transfers are involuntary on the part of the teacher. The transfer rate has increased substantially since

1990 (Boe et al., 2008) and is likely to accelerate. The current budget crisis has led school boards in most states to seek ways to reduce personnel costs by offering retirement incentives, closing programs, and laying off some teachers, often resulting in involuntary transfers for the remaining teachers ("Teacher Layoffs and School Closures," 2010). It is easy to see how special education teachers, especially those with non-categorical certification, can find themselves facing challenges like Elena's – assigned to teach students with disabilities not encountered before, at new grade or developmental levels, among unfamiliar colleagues in new settings.

Special education teachers who remain in the field long enough are certain to encounter significant change, both voluntary and mandated. The good news is that change does not have to be a difficult or painful experience. In fact, when we understand how change typically proceeds and when we take steps to actively manage it, change – even change we did not volunteer for - can be an opportunity for professional growth that proves to be stimulating and ultimately gratifying (Stivers & Cramer, 2009).

Understanding Resistance to Change

It didn't take Elena long to decide to fight the administration's decision to transfer her. She doubted her ability to be successful at the high school level: she had never been drawn to adolescents or to the setting of a resource program. Moreover, she had many reasons to want to remain at the elementary school. She finally was working effectively with her teaching assistant and making friends with the other teachers. She felt comfortable asking veteran teachers for help, and recently had started a cross-age tutoring program that was just beginning to flourish. So Elena opposed the transfer in every way she could: she appealed to her building principal for support; she filed a grievance with her union; she even requested a private meeting with the superintendent.

Teachers have been unfairly characterized as resistant to change (e.g., Richards, 2002; Zimmerman, 2006). In fact, teachers readily engage in change that they initiate, but may resist change that is mandated (Richardson, 1998). Consider the growth of inclusive education as an example. The development of more inclusive settings for educating students with disabilities has led to many changes in teaching assignments, both voluntary and involuntary. Inclusive education began as a grass-roots movement with teachers volunteering for this very significant change in assignment. As the demand for inclusive placements grew, however, schools could not rely only on volunteers, so some teachers were involuntarily assigned to inclusive classes. A few were reassigned several times, as schools tried to find the most effective partnerships and accommodate changing student needs. (Arguelles, Hughes, & Schumm, 2000; Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Reinhiller, 1996; Walther-Thomas & Bryant, 1996). It's no surprise that resistance accompanied some of these involuntary transfers.

Resistance to change is as much a natural and desirable part of life as change itself. It is our way of trying to preserve all that we have achieved, to protect things of value that we fear will be lost if a change goes unchallenged (Hall & Hord, 2001). Experts on change management (e.g., Jick & Peiperl, 2003) identify several different sources of resistance,

including failure to be convinced that change is warranted; habit, or a preference for the familiar and a desire to avoid disruption; negative experiences with previous change efforts; pragmatic concerns about how the change will be implemented; fear of loss, and /or fear of failure.

Each of these sources of resistance may come into play when a teacher is faced with an involuntary transfer. The last two, fear of loss and fear of failure, have particular relevance for special educators because they reflect the reality that for most of us, teaching is more than just a job -- it is a calling that helps to define our identity. We may resist change because we do not want to lose the sense of professional satisfaction we derive from knowing that our efforts are responsible for the success of students who otherwise might not succeed (Hargreaves, 2003). Nor do we want to lose our daily connections to the students and families we have come to cherish, and to the colleagues we trust and rely on. Lurking not far below the surface of our resistance, of course, is an unspoken fear of failure. If we are not effective in the new assignment, we stand to lose the high regard of our colleagues and our sense of ourselves as good teachers. Worse, our failure will mean that student learning will suffer.

Though resistance to a major change like an involuntary reassignment is an understandable and even expected response, getting mired in it is counterproductive, especially when the change is one over which the teacher has little or no influence. Stivers and Cramer (2009) offer suggestions for teachers seeking to understand and overcome the resistance they may feel. For example, teachers can begin by gathering more information, both about the reasons for the re-assignment and about the scope of their new responsibilities. Their resistance might ease upon learning more about the rationale for the change and the nature of the assignment. Also, teachers who resist a new assignment because of negative prior experiences with change should consider that those experiences undoubtedly gave them new skills for meeting the challenges change can bring, so they now are in a better position to manage a difficult transition successfully.

There may be rare circumstances under which a special educator faced with an involuntary transfer should resist. Special educators are bound by the professional standards adopted by the Council for Exceptional Children. Standard 9, Professional and Ethical Practice, specifies that each special educator must "Practice within one's skill limits and obtain assistance as needed (ICC9S7)." (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009, p.36). Special educators who do not have the skills needed to carry out the responsibilities of the new assignment ***and*** cannot access the professional development needed to gain those skills have an ethical obligation to take steps to insure that students with disabilities are served by teachers who are fully qualified.

Understanding Change as a Process

Major changes like involuntary transfers have the potential to derail even the most confident teacher. As we try to master the logistics of a new setting, establish collaborative relationships with new colleagues, and learn to teach unfamiliar curricula to

new students, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. The first task in navigating change is learning what to expect.

Three Phases

Change is not an event but a process that unfolds over time. Though the actual transfer occurs on a fixed date, the change process develops gradually, beginning well before and lasting long after that point. Along the way, we can feel bewildered and overwhelmed because little if anything seems familiar. However, there is a degree of predictability to many aspects of change. Social psychologist Kurt Lewin outlined a three-stage model for understanding change that later researchers and writers have built on (Schein, 1996). Among these is William Bridges (2004), whose work focuses on how change feels to the person who is in the midst of it. Bridges describes change as a process of transition with three perceptible phases: an ending, a neutral zone, and a new beginning.

Endings. Typically we think of change beginning with our awareness of something new on the horizon. However, "Even though it sounds backwards, endings always come first. The first task is to let go" (Bridges, 2004, p.80). In order to teach our new students well, we first have to stop teaching our old students – that is, we have to let go of the habits we developed for one group and be ready to develop habits tailored to another group. This can be hard, as Elena's experiences illustrate:

The families of Elena's students pleaded with district administrators, and Elena lobbied hard on her own behalf, but the director of special education would not budge. Because circumstances in her personal life made it impractical for her to look for another job, Elena began her new assignment feeling powerless, resentful, and pessimistic about the future.

During the first few weeks, Elena missed her friends and students, but most of all she missed the self assurance she once enjoyed. Her carefully planned lessons flopped, and her low key approach to behavior management failed her. She was used to resolving routine problems quickly, using familiar procedures and strategies she knew would work; now she felt like she continually made on-the-spot decisions without enough information, and then questioned her judgment afterward.

Like Elena, teachers who are involuntarily transferred need to recognize that there may be a strong sentimental pull toward the past, toward a time when things were familiar and predictable. But parting with an allegiance to ourselves as we were is an essential phase in the change process.

Neutral zone. In order to make the move from the old to the new, Bridges suggests that we must go through a neutral zone, a fallow time when we are at best treading water: not drowning, but most certainly not making progress. We recognize that we face challenges that are intellectual, emotional, and practical, but our efforts to meet them seem unproductive. In the unfamiliar landscape we make our way by trial and error, advancing unevenly, even haphazardly. It is a most unsettling time.

As the end of the first marking period approached, Elena admitted that a report card evaluating her would have to state "unsatisfactory progress; needs improvement." She was not sure how her program fit into the larger structure of the high school, and insecure about her role in the science class she had been assigned to co-teach. Her relationships with other teachers – including her co-teaching partner in science -were cordial but nothing more. She had, however, been won over by the resource center students, who were likeable and engaging. For their sakes she wanted to regain her old dynamism and effectiveness, to stop spinning her wheels and start moving forward, but she felt stalled.

New beginnings. The good news is that the neutral zone does not last forever. Internal signals, faint but persistent, indicate that we are preparing to make a transition to a new beginning. As special educators we know better than to simply wait for readiness; instead, we act. Often in the beginning, we use the time-honored trick of acting "as if." In approaching a new colleague, or meeting a student's family, or launching a new unit of instruction, we act with the self-assurance that we are confident will come in time. In this way we make a mental commitment to the new status quo and achieve the "internal re-identification" that tells us we have made our new beginning (Bridges, 2004, p.172).

Elena couldn't put her finger on when, or why, but she noticed that her outlook on her new position had improved. Maybe the turning point came when she actually started co-teaching, instead of just assisting in the science class; certainly it was evident when she began to look forward to sixth period, her most challenging group of students.

Elena wondered if the catalyst was an almost offhand remark made by an old friend from the elementary school. When they met unexpectedly, Elena spent several minutes venting, then finished with a plaintive "I just want to be an effective teacher!" Her friend laughed and said, "Well, there's your problem. Who can hit that moving target? But if your goal is to BECOME an effective teacher, you can achieve it every day."

Bridges would endorse the advice Elena's colleague gave her; he recommends that people in difficult transitions shift their focus from the goal to the process of achieving the goal.

Strategies for Navigating Change

Once we understand that change is a process with predictable phases, we can look for ways to navigate the phases more easily. There are strategies to orient our thinking about change, to guide us as we begin to navigate in a new environment, and to support us as we build relationships with new colleagues.

Prepare Mentally

Shape the direction of the transfer process. Although you may not have had a role in the decision that led to your transfer, you can take ownership of the transfer process.

Before you begin your new assignment, take a professional development day to visit the school. Ask the teachers you meet what they wish they had known when they were just starting out. Make plans to visit other schools with similar programs once your new assignment is underway.

Leverage your experiences. Stivers and Cramer's research (2009) documents the many ways teachers adapt to changes at school by using what they have learned through significant changes at home. For example, one teacher said "My husband's illness forced me to learn how to manage my time better and not worry about little things" (p. 20). Changes that are welcome, such as marriage and the birth of children, as well as those that are not, such as illness or the end of a relationship, give teachers new skills and new perspectives to draw on.

Cultivate optimism. Noting that the stress some special educators experience in their jobs contributes to the high turn-over rate in special education, Cancio and Conderman (2008) recommend that special educators develop "a positive and adaptive frame of mind (by) … setting realistic expectations, maintaining hope, looking at the positives, reflecting on one's work, and making work as enjoyable as possible" (p. 31). They provide details for these and other recommendations for developing a mind-set that is open to optimism.

Acclimate Gradually

Prioritize. You can't do everything in the first month or the first year. Make student learning your top priority, and let all other decisions flow from that.

Discover the unwritten rules. Take time to watch and listen. Identify the teacher leaders whose values are similar to yours, and after you have settled in a little, ask them to help you understand the school culture. "More experienced teachers know how the school system really works and how to get around potential roadblocks" (Rosenberg, O'Shea, & O'Shea, 2006, p. 328). These teacher leaders may also alert you to possible hidden agendas and political alignments within the school.

Accept that you are going to make some mistakes, and that at times you may feel inadequate. Resist the urge to explain that you didn't have problems like this in your previous position. Instead, look around for someone who accomplishes with ease the tasks that are vexing you, and ask for help.

Use positive self-talk. Self talk is "the strategy [that] involves a person telling himself or herself silently or aloud what she or he needs to hear or think to respond appropriately in a given situation" (Boutot, 2009, p. 278). Neck & Barnard (1996) encourage teachers to use self talk to "recognize and reverse self-defeating thought patterns" (p. 24). Positive self-talk helps teachers reorient their thinking to emphasize the opportunities that lie within the challenging situations they face. Special educators who learn this strategy to help them adjust to a new teaching assignment can then teach it to their students with disabilities who face challenges every day (Boutot, 2009).

Build New Relationships

Connect with your new colleagues. You will be tempted to work through your lunch period and eat at your desk. Don't. Informal social interactions lead to good working relationships in schools (Jarzabkowski, 2002) and in turn to the collaboration that is essential in special education today (Cramer, 2006).

Find a mentor. A good mentor has strong professional knowledge, standing within the school, and an interest in contributing to the field by helping other teachers (Jackson et al., 2003). Because "effective mentoring necessitates a certain chemistry for an appropriate interpersonal match …finding a suitable mentor requires effort and persistence" (Jackson et al., 2003, p. 328). Making that effort is a wise investment because according to South Carolina's Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention and Advancement (CERRA) "high quality mentoring is especially important for special education teachers because they, more so than other teachers, feel isolated" (para. 3) and that sense of isolation is a prime cause of attrition among special educators (Coleman, 2000).

Reframe supervision. In an era of heightened accountability, the teacher evaluation process can be anxiety-inducing, especially for experienced teachers who feel like novices again because of their reassignment. Try to view the supervisory process as a professional service provided by your employer, and to view yourself as an educated consumer of that service. Let those providing the supervisory service know what kind of help you need to grow in your new position, and what kinds of feedback you find most useful (Rosenberg et al., 2006).

Making the Most of Change

Try to recognize this experience for what it is: an opportunity to invest in yourself. Your administrators undoubtedly want you to succeed in your new position, so don't be shy about asking for support to attend professional development conferences. Use the transition to grow personally as well as professionally. "Grace and self-knowledge are scarce commodities. Transitions provide a great opportunity to add to the supply" (Collins, 2010, para. 5).

Finally, consider the research findings of Huberman and his colleagues: teachers who had encountered significant change in their careers, including major changes in teaching assignments, were the ones who were best able to remain energetic and productive in their careers, even after more than 30 years of teaching (Huberman, Grounauer & Marti, 1993). You can prepare for a long, satisfying career in teaching by being willing to accept the challenges that change brings.

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