

Retaining Special Educators with Autism Expertise in Schools

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Abstract

At a time when there is an increase in prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), creating a high demand for professionals who have knowledge and skills in the use of evidence-based practices identified for students with ASD, there is also a severe shortage of special educators in our schools. Teacher attrition is a significant contributor to this shortage. Therefore, it is important to determine the factors that support the retention of special educators with a specialization in autism who have a choice of employment options. This study surveyed graduates of an M.A. Degree/Autism specialization program who identified the factors they sought in a position. Results from this study indicate that providing professional development opportunities and support for leadership positions may impact the retention of highly skilled personnel.

Keywords: special educator retention, autism, teacher-leader, BCBA

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The prevalence of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been increasing and is currently 1 in 54 (Maenner et al., 2020). The Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) 41st annual report to Congress (2020) indicated that the percent of children and youth ages 6 to 21 with autism doubled from 2008 to 2017 across the 50 states. Behavioral and educational interventions are identified as effective approaches to address the challenges in social-communication and repetitive behaviors associated with autism (Hall, 2018). Consequently, there is a demand for knowledgeable and skilled personnel competent in designing and implementing beneficial educational programs for the growing number of students with ASD.

Special education teachers are the personnel most frequently responsible for designing the educational programs for individuals with ASD. Special educators with the additional

knowledge and skills in the implementation of the identified evidence-based practices for individuals with ASD (Hume et al., 2021) are particularly sought for teaching positions. Since the majority of the identified evidence-based practices for individuals with autism have their foundation in applied behavior analysis (Steinbrenner et al., 2020), graduates of programs with an emphasis on behavior analysis, such as those with embedded course sequences verified by the Behavior Analysis Certification Board®, who also have a teaching license or credential would have this specific expertise and would be in high demand.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Education consistently identifies special education as an area of teacher shortage (Cross, 2017) with a shortage of between 8% and 10% for much of the previous decades (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). In some states, such as California, the situation is worse with 64% of special education teaching positions in 2014-2015 filled with personnel without a credential (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). These shortages mean that the most vulnerable students with the greatest needs are taught by those who are the least qualified (Ondrasek et al., 2020) and this situation is exacerbated in high poverty schools or those that serve racially, ethnically and socio-economically diverse communities of students (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

In order to address the shortage of autism specialists, there needs to be a focus not only on the recruitment to the profession, but on ensuring there is a system of support for retention (Ondrasek et al., 2020; Vittek, 2015). In his report, Futernick, (2007) pointed out that without a focus on retention, like a bucket with a hole, we will continuously fill special education teacher vacancies with those who leave the field. In their review of the literature on attrition and retention from 2002 to 2017, Billingsley and Bettini (2019) found that special educators are more likely to leave as a result of demanding working conditions, a lack of support from administrators, colleagues, and paraprofessionals, caseload size, financial compensation as well as for nonwork related reasons. Four of the 25 studies included in this review focused specifically on attrition of teachers serving students with emotional behavior disorders, but none focused on personnel with autism expertise.

Reviewing the literature on teacher burnout, Brunsting, Sreckovic and Lane (2014) found 23 relevant studies addressing special education teacher burnout. Their findings of the factors contributing to burnout are similar to those resulting in attrition and include: lack of support from principals, excessive paperwork and non-instructional tasks, challenging student behaviors, role overload, and an expectation/reality mismatch. Moreover, Wong, Ruble, Yu, and McGrew (2017) found that burn-out as measured by the personal accomplishment of special education teachers working with students with ASD has a significant direct effect on student Individualized Education Program (IEP) outcomes as measured by a goal attainment scaling process. The results of these studies underline the necessity of supporting and enhancing the competence of autism specialists in order to avoid the negative impact of burnout on the specialist, and on the progress of the individual with ASD.

Special educators with autism expertise who also are Board Certified Behavior Analysts® (BCBAs) are also in demand to fill positions in organizations that serve individuals with autism in the home, in community settings, and as consultants to school districts. An analysis of job postings published in 2020 by the Behavior Analysis Certification Board, indicates that

there has been an increase in the demand for BCBA's each of the last 10 years, with a 17% increase between 2019 and 2020 across almost every state, with the highest demand in 2020 in California, Massachusetts, Texas, Florida and Georgia. Currently 73% of all certified behavior analysts at all levels (bachelor, Master, Doctoral) identify autism spectrum disorder as their primary area of professional emphasis.

The combination of training for a special education credential and board certification as a behavior analyst provides a valued combination of competencies. However, information about the retention of special educators who also have behavioral competencies and autism expertise in the school system is lacking. Public school systems aiming to retain special educators who are also certified as behavior analysts have the added challenge of competing with another high demand profession for which these teachers also are qualified.

Special educators who are also BCBA's clearly have a choice of positions, especially if they are working in any of the high demand states. Information from a sample of highly educated special education graduates, some of whom also obtained their BCBA, to determine what they seek in a position, would provide guidance to the field regarding the supports needed to retain the most competent personnel. The benefits of retaining competent special educators include employing personnel who can a) design individualized education plans that maximize student potential and result in progress with goals, and b) incorporate strategies to prevent challenging behavior that could result in alternative placements.

The following study surveyed nine years of program graduates (N=101) from a university graduate program providing an autism specialization with the aim of determining the sources of supports for those remaining in the profession. Graduates of this program have a M.A. Degree, a focus on providing education for individuals with ASD that includes implementing evidence-based practices, and embedded opportunities for practicum experiences. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What percentage of survey respondents remain in a position focused on the education of individuals with ASD?
2. How many graduates change positions within the field?
3. What factors are associated with changing positions from or within the school setting?
and
4. What types of positions are chosen by graduates with both a special education credential and a BCBA[®]?

Method

Graduates Completing Survey

Graduates from nine cohorts of a M.A. Degree program in California with a concentration in special education and a specialization in autism (N=101) were invited to participate in the study. The two-year master's degree program embedded a Verified Course Sequence (VCS) for certification as a Board Certified Behavior Analyst[®], as well as an approved Behavior Analysis Certification Board[®] supervised practicum experience that provided half the required hours.

Additionally, the M.A. degree program also embedded the required coursework for the Professional Clear Education Specialist, or special education, credential.

Graduates enrolled in the two-year M.A. Degree program simultaneously completed the requirements for Induction, including receiving support from their school district. It was also possible to complete requirements towards certification as a behavior analyst during this program. Certification is organized by the Behavior Analysis Certification Board® (BACB) and requires a Master Degree, completion of a BACB Verified Course Sequence, field experience hours supervised by a BCBA, and passing a multiple choice exam. Once certified, specified hours of continuing education units including CEUs in specific areas (i.e., ethics, supervision) is a requirement for certification renewal every two years.

Candidates admitted to the program were seeking M.A. Degree preparation that would lead to a Professional credential in special education with a specialization in ASD, or a BCBA certification, or both. The program used a cohort model with the intentional development of communities of practice to foster peer collaboration. Course content focused on the implementation of evidence-based practices, with the majority of these practices having their roots in behavior analysis (Hume et al., 2021), paired with coaching from a mentor.

Survey Contents

Participants completed an 18-item survey. They reported the year they graduated, their role when they graduated, if they remained in the field, if so their current role, if they obtained BCBA certification, and how many times, if at all, they change positions since graduation. If position changes had occurred, they selected their reasons for the change(s) from a list of possible reasons provided. They indicated the sources of support for sustained use of evidence-based practices and the frequency of coaching or supervision they received, if any. They were also asked to rank their top three stressors in their current role, whether or not they anticipated changing positions within the next five years, and if so, the factors contributing to that potential switch. They were also provided with five 5-point Likert-type questions to evaluate job satisfaction, whether they felt they were supported in their current position by administration, and whether they believed the M.A. program prepared them to implement evidence-based practices (EBPs) effectively. A final question asked them to indicate the aspects of the M.A. program that contributed to their retention in the field from a list of seven factors.

The M.A. graduates were sent an email message from the special education department program coordinator with whom they were all familiar, explaining the purpose of the survey. IRB approval was obtained for all evaluation studies of graduates. Participants were informed that individual results would remain confidential. They were provided a hyperlink to the survey and the opportunity to voluntarily and anonymously answer the online survey items using Survey Monkey. Results were then sent anonymously to the second author. Reminder emails about the survey were sent out after two weeks.

Results

The survey was sent to 101 graduates from the M.A. program, of which 57 responded (56%). The proportion of respondents with and without a special education credential (77% with & 23% without) was nearly identical to the overall sample who received surveys (79% with and 21%

without). The respondents without a teaching credential were working toward the BCBA® qualifications only. Ninety-three percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the M.A. program prepared them to be able to implement evidence-based practices.

Fifty-four of the 57 respondents remained in the field (94%). The three who exited the field indicated the reason was due to unrelated life circumstances such as starting a family. At the time of the study, more than half of the respondents (n=32) worked for a school district while the remaining (n=22) worked for a private agency serving individuals with autism and their families. Eight graduates who were working for a school district also had certification as a behavior analyst or were BCBAs.

Why Graduates Changed Positions

A total of 72% of respondents changed positions since graduating (n=41). The average number of times graduates changed positions was 2.0 for all respondents. Over 50% agreed or strongly agreed that they changed positions because of frustration in their job. The most frequently identified stressors graduates identified in their current positions were 1) finding time to train support staff, prepare for teaching, create student materials, and plan for IEPs, and 2) addressing challenging behaviors from students. Approximately one third (31%) of the respondents who switched positions strongly disagreed, disagreed, or remained neutral that they receive support from administration (e.g. Principal, School Psychologist, Clinical Director) that helps them perform their job to the greatest extent of their ability.

The top four factors graduates indicated as reasons for changing positions were: 1) seeking professional development opportunities (35%), 2) as a result of a promotion (35%), 3) better pay (33%), and 4) increased opportunities to implement evidence based practices (29%). See Table 1 for a description of the reasons for changing positions by respondents for each of the times they switched positions since graduation. The lowest three factors were: preference for level of severity of individuals with of ASD on caseload (5%), ethical issues (5%), and 3) smaller caseload (3%). Some graduates changed positions within a school or district and others switched districts.

Table 1
Reasons for Position Changes by Graduates

Reasons	n	% of graduates
Professional development opportunities	20	35%
Promotion	20	35%
Better pay	19	33%
Increased opportunity to implement EBP's	17	29%
Promotion opportunity	13	22%
Increased flexibility of schedule	11	19%
Lack of support from administration	10	17%

Unrelated life circumstance	9	15%
Support from colleagues for the implementation of EBP's	8	14%
Increased support from new colleagues	7	12%
Convenience of job site location	7	12%
Preference for age of individuals on caseload	3	5%
Preference for level of severity on caseload	3	5%
Ethical issues	3	5%
Smaller caseload	2	3%

Twenty-two of the respondents indicated that they currently work for a private agency and approximately half (n=12) of them also held a teaching credential. Ten left a position with a school district to work for an agency and two choose a position with an agency upon graduation. The top-rated reasons for choosing to work for an agency were the same as for the overall sample: professional development opportunities (70%), increased opportunities for use of evidence based practices (60%), promotion (50%), and better pay (50%). In addition, graduates that changed positions from a school district to an agency did so due to increased flexibility in their work schedule (30%) and perceived increased support from colleagues (30%). None of the respondents who worked for a private agency when they started the M.A. program left for a position in a school district due to the lack of the required credentials. Twenty-one respondents (68%) reported that they anticipate changing jobs within the next five years. The highest two reasons for anticipating a job or position change were promotion (35%) and better pay (28%).

Sources of Support for Retention

The top sources of support reported by graduates for using evidence-based practices in their current position were: collaboration with colleagues (86%), attending conferences paid for by their school district or private agency (65%), and by reading up-to-date peer-reviewed journals (60%) (see Table 2 for full results). Ninety-three percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that collaboration with colleagues helps improve overall satisfaction in their current position.

Table 2
Sources of Support in Current Position

	n	% of respondents
Collaboration with colleagues	49	86%
Attending conferences paid for by your <i>school, district, or agency</i>	37	65%
Reading up-to-date peer-reviewed journal articles	34	60%
Attending in-service trainings provided by your	31	54%

school, district, or agency		
Collaboration with other graduates from MA program	29	51%
Collaboration with administration	29	51%
Textbooks from the MA degree program classes	26	46%
Attending conferences paid for <i>on your own</i>	20	35%
Using peer-reviewed journal articles obtained while in MA degree program	18	32%
Slides or notes from the MA degree program classes	13	23%
Using the National Professional Developmental Center (NPDC) on ASD website	13	23%

When asked about the frequency of coaching or supervision they received since graduation, 92% of respondents who either had worked or worked (N=24) for a private agency reported they received consistent coaching support or supervision either weekly (50%), or monthly (50%). The majority of the graduates that received weekly supervision or coaching have been getting that intensity the entire time since they graduated (83%) or up to seven years. In contrast, only 25% of respondents (n=8) that worked in a school district reported receiving any supervision support since graduation or post Induction, and this occurred weekly for only one graduate and monthly for two others. Graduates who did not receive supervision from school district personnel held a variety of positions including special education teachers, autism behavior specialists, one school psychologist, and one principal.

Discussion

The graduates who responded to this survey remain in the field (94%) in some capacity regardless of reported frustration or lack of administrative support in a position, in part, because they have a choice of employment options. Three-quarters of the special educators/behavior analysts had changed positions since graduation. The reasons that the respondents changed positions, including leaving the public schools - to obtain professional development opportunities, to receive a promotion, better pay, and increased opportunities to implement evidence-based practices in this study - are consistent with the factors identified by Mason-Williams and colleagues (2020) who recommend systemic changes guided by policy. In addition, the results of this study indicate that when there is a lack of personal accomplishment for special educators, they not only experience burn-out (Wong et al., 2017) but they will leave their position if they have a choice of a job.

It is clear from these graduate's responses that arranging for professional development opportunities is key to retention. Ondrasek and colleagues (2020) agree with these findings and write, "Access to high-quality preparation and professional learning opportunities can help curb attrition and ensure that special education teachers stay in the field" (p. 13). It is also clear that such opportunities are currently not a priority in the public school systems where the graduates were employed. There are currently no state required CEUs for renewing professional credentials in special education which would encourage the LEAs to provide professional development, and respondents reported few to no arrangements for mentoring and coaching since they completed the initial induction program and graduated with their M.A. degree.

In addition, Natale and colleagues from the *Teachers of the Year* network (2013) identified

career pathways that take into account the mobility of teachers as a hallmark of successful educational systems internationally and recommend a clear path to career advancement within the school systems. Respondents in this study identified seeking a promotion as one of the top reasons for changing positions, including leaving the public schools. Danielson (2006) describes teaching as a “flat” profession and recommends that education systems consider teacher-leadership positions to capitalize on teachers’ experiences and desires to have influence beyond the classroom. A study of pre-service teachers indicates that teachers aspire to have a leadership position for at least part of their responsibilities after five years and even more so after 10 years of working in the profession (Reeves & Lowenhaupt, 2016). The data from this study is consistent with these findings.

Survey respondents identified collaboration with colleagues as the most frequently selected source of support for retention by graduates, which is consistent with a recommendation from Danielson, for school personnel to create a culture of professional inquiry that promotes professional learning and collegiality as part of a teacher-leaders’ role. Providing the time and resources for peer collaboration is likely to prevent burn-out (Leko et al., 2015) and contribute to retention of these valuable personnel. There are many opportunities for competent special educators to provide leadership and support to others. Support from teacher-leaders would reduce the stressors related to IEP planning, supporting staff, addressing challenging behaviors, and organizing materials that were reported as stressors by respondents of this survey. They can serve as Mentor or Guide teachers during candidate student teaching or clinical pre-service experiences. They can support new teachers during Induction. In addition, they can provide specialized training and support such as with content focused on strategies for addressing the characteristics of ASD, addressing challenging behavior, and designing data collection systems for progress monitoring. They also can provide the needed training for paraprofessionals regarding foundational skills for working with students with disabilities, including students with autism (Butt & Lowe, 2012).

The fact that 48% of the respondents working in schools reported no mentoring, coaching or supervision since graduation is alarming. Although there is a cost to creating teacher-leader positions and providing coaching support to special educators, the cost to the school, and to the students, when trained educators leave and are replaced by unprepared staff is much higher. The importance of arranging for opportunities to interact and obtain support from knowledgeable colleagues was essential for the survey respondents as evidenced by the large number (86%) who attributed their ability to sustain EBPs in their current practice due to collaboration with colleagues.

In addition, university and college programs producing competent graduates can facilitate continued collaboration of peers through the provision of professional development opportunities. These could include invitations for guest speaking in college classes, arranging workshops (i.e., especially those generating BCBA approved CEUs), or arranging for graduates to provide coaching or supervision for graduate students in training. In addition, providing professional development activities such as support for attending conferences or providing subscriptions to relevant journals was valued by these graduates and could be arranged by employers.

Limitations

It is important to note that the graduates responding to this survey are from several cohorts in only one university program that is located in an area of the United States where there are many agencies supporting individuals with ASD through funding from insurance companies. It is also important to consider that 43% of the graduates that did not respond to the survey and their responses may have been different, although a response rate of 57% is often considered acceptable in survey research (Baruch, 1999). It is also not known which aspects of the university program resulted in graduates who remained committed to the field and focused on implementing evidence-based practices. Future research would need to address these questions.

Conclusion

This study provided information about the reasons special education professionals with competence in autism spectrum disorders leave or remain in their current positions in the public schools in a community with a high demand for their expertise outside of the school system. These findings suggest that school districts providing a career pathway for teacher leadership and professional development activities may foster a culture of inquiry (Danielson, 2006) that supports teacher retention. The relationship between creating teacher-leader positions and the retention of special educators needs to be evaluated through further research. Administrators responsible for recruiting and maintaining a skilled teacher work force do not have to assume that teacher attrition is a given. This study suggests that there are factors within the control of district and school administration that can lead to retention of their most talented and skilled teachers.

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