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SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER SHORTAGES: BARRIERS OR LACK OF PREPARATION?

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This research review examines various barriers that affect the retention and attrition of special education teachers. The purpose of this examination is to look at various problems associated with maintaining and attracting new teachers to the field of education. Retention and attrition will be vital components in addressing teacher shortages in special education. Research obtained for this topic will include various recommendations and suggestions for increasing the numbers of teachers in special education. The review of literature will also discuss teacher preparation programs that prepare teachers in special education. Findings in this paper will assist in solving the problem of special education teacher shortages.

The retention and attrition of special education teachers have been a growing concern over the last few years. Special education teachers have one of the largest numbers of shortages identified in the field of education (Miller, Brownwell, & Smith, 1999). Many school districts find it very difficult to fill position that requires special education endorsements. It is a problem felt all over the nation. As a result, in most states, special education classrooms have the largest number of unqualified teachers. Many people speculate about why there is such an enormous shortage of special education teachers. Speculations range from lack of respect, lack of preparation, lack of support, etc. Researchers have documented higher turnover among special education teachers (Boe, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997). The real crux of the situation appears to be in the job design and the expectations placed upon special education teachers.

Preparation programs for special education teachers are also another factor in looking at retention and attrition. Researchers have found many special education teachers to be unprepared for all the responsibilities that the job encompasses. Some say that this leads to early burnout and disillusionment in teaching children with special needs. Others suggest that maybe special education teachers lack the leadership qualities that heighten the ability for them to deal with the demands of the job. Researchers also say that special education teachers must develop leadership skills that will assist in becoming effective advocates for the field of education.

Special education teachers are valued mostly for their commitment to serve such a vast dimensional groups. Teachers in the field of special education work very hard to fit a *one-size fits*

all plan into a formula that does not work for everyone. Such expectations have been conducive to the increased numbers of special education teacher shortages.

Special education teachers have one of the most hardest and most complicated jobs in the field of education. They have been endowed with a federally mandated plan to address all children with special needs. Accomplishing this task would not be so difficult if the appropriate support and training was included. To say that special educators have barriers to overcome would be putting things a little lightly.

Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (2001) conducted a study that indicated that stress in job design (administration support, inadequate resources, limited decision-making power). The job design for special education teachers is very encumbered and ambiguous. Seriously addressing the design of special educator's role is a critical need, since many special educators transfer to general education positions (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss, (2001). All of these things are considered barriers that hinder the effectiveness of teaching special education. These barriers encompass the haggard responsibility of completing repetitive paperwork, allotted mandatory meetings, and the lack of respect from other colleagues.

Many teachers that leave the field of education have become disgusted with the amount of paperwork that is required to do the job. Special educators are not only responsible for the supervision of their classroom but also the supervision of meetings that must take place to stay in alignment with federal regulations. The problem exists when special educators must teach an individualized plan without appropriate time and resources.

Andrews, Evans, & Miller (2002) states that the main factor of retention for special education teachers is support i.e. financial, administration, etc. Many educators' responses to researchers about attrition focuses on disillusionment and the lack of value placed on the work that is expected. This was supported by a research question that showed results that reflected special educators views of districts and principals who don't respond to their expertise and concerns (Andrews, Evans, & Miller, 2002). Teacher preparation programs have become a major focus point for obtaining teachers for the field of special education. Some educators feel that field experience is most crucial in preparing individuals for the classroom. There has been an enormous amount of innovative ways to assist in obtaining candidates for special education programs. Many school districts and universities work in collaboration to fill positions that need qualified special education teachers. There has been some talk of partnerships between schools & universities created to recruit teachers for special education. Concern for the needs of the first-year special education teacher, the existing shortage of special education teachers, and the high rates of attrition in special education have led to the recommendation that mentoring be provided to all beginning special educators (Whitaker, 2000).

Recruitment of candidates for the special education classroom is very important. Even more important is maintaining the allotment of teachers that already exist. In order to increase shortages, all stakeholders must become creative in recruiting and retaining qualified special education teachers.

During training, an emphasis should be placed on professional leadership with a focus on helping interns and student teachers (Andrews, Evans, & Miller, 2002). Training special educators as leaders is a very effective mode to increasing retention levels. Leadership opportunities may assist with the lack of empowerment special educators may feel. Valesky, Green, and Isaacs (1997) supported data suggesting that administrative self-efficacy is through coursework and through field experience involving special needs students. Currently, many special education

preparation programs do not include many, if any foundation courses that would assist in developing a core understanding of leadership. Coursework and an understanding of the dynamics of leadership during training would also allow special educators insight into the principal's local control. Then, special educators could have a better understanding of administrative responsibilities. Lovitt (1993) suggested having administrative training foundations in special education. Administrators would benefit from foundations in special education when they have to address barriers that are affecting teacher turnover and attrition.

There are specific ways that principals and colleagues can support special education teachers (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss, 2001). Many types of support are inexpensive and it assists in improving teacher attrition. Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (2001) recommends providing meaningful professional development opportunities, helping the special education teacher through conflicts and confusions in the demands of their job, and engendering school culture that encourages support from fellow teachers as means of assisting special education teachers. Sometimes principals feel that special education teachers should receive support needed from within their own department administrators. Cross & Billingsley (1994, March-April) states that the principals' support will help to alleviate stress, increase leadership roles, and produce job satisfaction that can influence commitment and teachers' intent to stay in teaching.

In most professions, job design can create havoc in individual's hopes to achieve a desirable outcome. For most individuals, this results into feelings of frustration and some form of work-related stress, which in turn may lead to lowered self-efficacy and increased employee attrition (Gersten, R., Keating, T., Yovanaf, P., & Harniss, M. K., 2001). Consequently, in order to retain and recruit prospects all stake holders will have to be creative in re-designing special education so that teachers will once again value their jobs. Districts need to seriously address the issues of job design if they are going to retain qualified special educators (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss, 2001).

Researchers have begun to focus more on an in-depth understanding of the working conditions of special educators that lead to increased job satisfaction and a higher commitment to the field of special education, as opposed to merely trying to ascertain factors associated with job longevity (Gersten, R., Keating, T., Yovanaf, P., & Harniss, M. K., 2001). Retention doesn't appear to be the problem with special education teacher shortages. Based on current research data, there appears to be many other indicators that lead to teacher attrition and retention. As Yee (1990) eloquently noted, in both general and special education, there are numerous teachers who *retire on the job* which suggest that simple retention of teaching personnel is not necessarily the answer.

Jeptha V. Greer (1992, March-April) states that if special education is to be successful, that is, if it is going to meet each student's needs, then recruiting quality people and retaining them has got to become a greater focus of everyone's efforts.

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