

Special Education Teacher Retention and Attrition: A Critical Analysis of the Literature

Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by
Bonnie S. Billingsley
Virginia Tech, Blacksburg

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COPSSE research is focused on the preparation of special education professionals and its impact on beginning teacher quality and student outcomes. Our research is intended to inform scholars and policymakers about advantages and disadvantages of preparation alternatives and the effective use of public funds in addressing personnel shortages.

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COPSSE Project
P.O. Box 117050
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 32611
352-392-0701
352-392-2655 (Fax)

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INTRODUCTION

The lack of qualified special education teachers threatens the quality of education that students with disabilities receive. Attrition plays a part in the teacher shortage problem, and efforts to improve retention must be informed by an understanding of the factors that contribute to attrition. Specifically, this paper provides a thematic synthesis of studies investigating factors that contribute to special education teacher attrition and retention. Five major themes are addressed: (1) teacher characteristics, (2) personal factors, (3) teacher qualifications, (4) work environments, and (5) teachers' affective reactions to work.

One of the most important challenges in the field of special education is developing a qualified work force and creating work environments that sustain special educators' involvement and commitment. The field has an insufficient supply of new teachers as well as qualified teachers who are not currently teaching to fill vacancies. For example, administrators report that a shortage of qualified applicants is the greatest barrier to obtaining special education teachers.

Roughly 10% of special educators are not fully certified for their positions, according to *Bright Futures for Exceptional Learners: An Action Agenda to Achieve Quality Conditions for Teaching and Learning* (2000). However, these statistics may not fully illustrate the extent of the teacher shortage problem in special education. School districts may reduce services to students with disabilities or raise class size limits. There are also serious implications for students with disabilities if they are being taught by people with less than adequate preparation.

Although the causes of the special educator shortage problem are complex, the retention of teachers is a critical part of solving the problem. The shortage problem will not be solved by recruiting thousands of new people into teaching if many leave after a few short years. It is critical to know how many teachers are leaving and what they do upon leaving.

Extending existing reviews, this paper synthesizes research since 1992, including: (1) thematic synthesis of studies investigating factors that contribute to special education teacher attrition and retention; (2) a critique of definitional, conceptual, and, methodological approaches used to study special education attrition; and (3) priorities for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Methodology

Electronic databases (i.e., ERIC, *Psychological Abstracts*) were searched using terms such as special education teacher attrition, retention, turnover, and transfer for studies prior to 1992. Sixteen (16) research-based articles in scholarly journals met the criteria outlined above. Several research reports and presentations from major funded projects were also included.

Definitions of Attrition & Retention

Some research investigated what teachers actually do (i.e., stay, transfer, exit). The majority of special education researchers do not actually study special education teachers' career behaviors; instead, they examine existing populations of current teachers to determine their intent to leave as a proxy for attrition.

RESULTS

This review discusses the literature using the frameworks of two conceptual models. These models describe: (1) a broad understanding of factors that influence special education attrition and retention and (2) the wide range of factors that influence special educators' career decisions.

Billingsley (1993) has offered a schematic representation of the range of influences on teachers' career decisions, including External Factors, Employment Factors, and Personal Factors. External

Factors (economic, societal, institutional), which are external to the teacher and employing district, have an indirect effect on teachers' career decisions. The center of this model focuses on Employment Factors (professional qualifications, work conditions and rewards, and commitments to school, district, teaching field, and teaching profession). Billingsley hypothesized that when "professional qualifications and work conditions are not as favorable, teachers are likely to experience fewer rewards and, thus, reduced commitment. Whether teachers actually leave depends on a host of personal, social, and economic factors" (p. 147). Personal Factors include variables outside of the employment arena that may directly or indirectly influence career decisions, such as life circumstances and priorities.

The second model proposed by Brownell and Smith (1993) is an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's earlier model that incorporates four nested, interrelated systems. These systems include the microsystem (teacher's immediate setting and interactions that occur as a result of student and teacher characteristics), the mesosystem (interrelations among several variables in the work place, e.g., collegiality and administrative support), the exosystem (formal and informal social structures, e.g., socioeconomic level of community, nature of district), and the macrosystem (cultural beliefs and ideologies of the dominant culture as well as economic conditions that impact schools and teachers' career decisions). Brownell and Smith propose a framework for designing and interpreting attrition/retention research, but not necessarily as a causal model to be tested. They expect that variable relationships may be complex and reciprocal and that some variables may correlate more highly with attrition than others.

Both frameworks identify variables that may be related to attrition and propose relationships between the variables. The present paper provides a thematic synthesis of findings, including: (1) Teacher Characteristics and Personal Factors, (2) Teacher Qualifications, (3) Work Environment Factors, and (4) Affective Reactions to Work.

Teacher Characteristics and Personal Factors

Although some special education researchers have investigated the relationship between attrition and demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, and race), few conclusions can be drawn about teacher characteristics and attrition. Age is the only demographic variable that is consistently linked to attrition in the special education literature. Researchers show that younger special educators are more likely to leave (or express intent to leave) than older special educators. The relationship between gender and attrition has been included in only a few special education studies, and the findings are mixed. Race as a factor in attrition studies has also given inconsistent results. Personal finances and perceived opportunities may influence whether teachers stay or leave.

Teacher Qualifications

Teacher qualifications have received less attention in the special education attrition literature than any other area. Several studies have shown a higher level of attrition among uncertified teachers than certified teachers have. Few studies address the relationship of attrition to academic ability, degrees earned, or the quality of teacher preparation. At least two studies have shown that teachers with higher tested ability are more likely to leave the field.

Work Environments

The special education attrition and retention research shows that the work environment is important to teachers' job satisfaction and subsequent career decisions. The paper addresses the relationship of attrition to specific work environment variables, e.g., salary, school climate, administrative support, colleague support, support through induction and mentoring, professional development, teacher roles, paper work, and students and case load issues. Researchers have found that salary is clearly associated with attrition behavior in special education. At least two studies suggest that when teachers have overall positive feelings about the climate of their schools, they are more likely to stay in teaching. In the SPeNSE study, entitled *A High-Quality Teacher for Every Classroom*, school climate is measured by a scale that includes a range of items such as:

school administrative behavior is supportive and encouraging, necessary materials are available when you need them, most of your colleagues share your beliefs and values about what the central mission of the school should be, there is a great deal of cooperation among staff members, this school is a safe place for students, and teachers feel included in the school. The paper reviews related topics under the categories of; salary, administrative support, colleague support, support through induction and mentoring, professional development, teacher roles, role problems, paper work, service-delivery models and shifts in responsibility, as well as students and case load issues.

Affective Responses to Work

The research shows that excessive and prolonged work problems increase stress, lower job satisfaction, and reduce organizational and professional commitment.

Summary of Research Findings in Attrition and Research

A decade of research shows that teacher and work factors are critical to special educators' job satisfaction and their subsequent career decisions. Attrition researchers have identified several key teacher characteristics and personal factors that influence teachers' decisions to leave special education: (1) there are consistent reports that younger and inexperienced special educators are more likely to leave than their older, more experienced counterparts; (2) there is support from two major studies that uncertified teachers are more likely to leave than certified teachers; (3) special educators with higher test scores are more likely to leave; and (4) teachers' personal circumstances and priorities influence attrition and retention.

The majority of attrition studies focus on the effects of district and school working conditions, work assignment factors, and teachers' affective reactions to their work. Work Environment factors associated with staying include: (1) higher salaries; (2) positive school climate; (3) adequate support systems, particularly principal and central office support; (4) opportunities for professional development; (5) reasonable role demand; and (6) manageable case loads. Problematic district and school factors—especially low salaries, poor climate, lack of administrative support, and role overload and dissonance—lead to negative affective reactions, e.g., high levels of stress, low levels of job satisfaction, and low levels of commitment. These negative reactions can often lead to withdrawal and eventually attrition.

A CRITIQUE OF THE DEFINITIONS, CONCEPTUAL MODELS, AND METHODOLOGIES

The paper describes the use of different attrition definitions, which depend on the focus of the study. Future studies of attrition need to focus on attrition behavior (teachers who actually leave their positions). Unless researchers use follow-up surveys, distinctions between different leavers are not possible. Whenever possible, future studies should include various types of attrition. Studies of special education attrition over the last ten years have been more comprehensive than the earlier exploratory studies, due in part to stronger conceptualizations of the factors associated with attrition. Recent reports include important variables that have not been investigated in earlier special education studies, e.g., such as school climate, mentoring, manageability of work, self-efficacy, and comparisons between general and special educators. Although the knowledge base is growing, greater attention needs to be given to the framing of these studies, particularly models for examining turnover behavior.

In general, studies conducted in the last ten years include larger samples from more geographically diverse areas than earlier studies. Samples of specific states, conducted at one point in time, with a small number of teachers can be limited. Interpreting special education attrition findings is problematic, because samples include variations in the data collection period, and different attrition definitions lead to different types of samples. Most attrition studies reviewed involved the use of questionnaires and survey methods to explore the range of variables associated with attrition. Researchers analyzed these data from several approaches.

Most attrition studies involved the use of questionnaires and survey methods to explore the range of variables associated with attrition. Statistical methods include tests of bivariate relationships to determine if a particular variable (e.g., age, gender, salary) is associated with special education attrition; multivariate methods to investigate attrition and retention; multinomial logit models; and path models to test causal relationships. Large-scale studies using multivariate methods—which can demonstrate the dynamic interactions between important variables and career decisions while controlling for effects of other variables—are recommended. Few researchers have used qualitative methods in attrition studies, e.g., open-ended surveys of leavers, interviews with teachers who have left, those who intend to leave.

PRIORITIES FOR RESEARCH

This section identifies knowledge gaps in the literature and proposes several priorities for research. More qualitative studies are needed to address the teacher’s perspective and important contributors to job satisfaction, commitment, stress, and career decisions. The relationship between teacher quality and retention has received little attention. Little is known about how educational background, preparation, or classroom practice is related to career longevity. Longitudinal studies of special educators from their entry into teacher preparation programs during the first years of teaching are needed. A closer look is needed at the role that teacher preparation plays in the development of special educators’ career dispositions (e.g., involvement, initial commitment) and the decision to stay or leave. In addition, little is known about strategies that faculty in teacher preparation programs might employ to increase special educators’ survival in teaching. Future research must address programs and strategies to reduce attrition among early career teachers, given they are at most risk of leaving. Other priorities are to study teachers during their preparation programs and follow these teachers through the early career period and to investigate special educators’ entry into teaching to find out how to best support their transition into teaching. The relationship of collaboration between teachers to attrition has received only scant attention.

The paper describes the rationale for making the following research topics a priority:

- teachers’ perspectives
- teacher preparation and quality
- the early career period
- support for teachers
- reducing role overload and dissonance
- comparisons of teacher groups.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

In summary, this review found that a wide range of factors influence attrition, including teachers’ personal circumstances and priorities. Most of the attrition studies focus on problematic work environment variables and their relationships to attrition. Work environmental factors, (e.g., low salaries, poor climate, lack of administrative support, role problems) can lead to negative affective reactions, e.g., high levels of stress as well as low levels of job satisfaction and commitment. These negative reactions can lead to withdrawal and eventually attrition. In addition, teacher characteristics and qualification variables that are linked to attrition include the following: (1) special educators who are younger and inexperienced are at higher risk of leaving than their older and more experienced counterparts, (2) those who are uncertified are more likely to leave than those who are certified, and (3) those with higher test scores are more likely to leave than those with lower scores.

Policy makers and administrators interested in reducing attrition must facilitate the development of better work environments for special educators. Addressing issues such as teacher role overload and the need for critical supports (e.g., administrative support, professional development) must be addressed to ensure that teachers can be effective in their work. Focusing on one or two

aspects of teachers' work lives will probably be insufficient to substantially reduce attrition. For example, providing beginning teachers with formal induction programs is not likely to be effective in the end unless their work assignments are also reasonable. A holistic look at creating positive work environments should not only reduce attrition behavior, but should also help sustain special educators' involvement and commitment in their work.

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