

A Case Study of Factors that Influenced the Attrition or Retention of Two First-Year Special Education Teachers

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Abstract

The issue of attrition and retention has been a chronic problem in the field of education for decades. School districts across the United States are experiencing shortages of qualified special education teachers largely due to high turnover rates, with many of these teachers electing not to return after their first year of teaching. In fact, roughly nine percent of special educators not return to the profession after their first year, citing themes such as lack of administrative support, excessive paperwork and burnout as primary factors that prompted their decision to leave. The purpose of this study was to identify problems faced by two novice special educators from their own perspective. Further analysis of the research data produced additional themes, including poor co-teaching relationships, the use of ineffective co-teaching models, student behavior, time management, paperwork, isolationism, time management, ambiguous special education practices and procedures.

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Over 6 million children in public school systems across the United States received special education services (Roach, 2009), placing the need for highly qualified special education teachers well into the hundreds of thousands in order to appropriately accommodate these children in these classroom (Hanson, 2011). However, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), there is a severe shortage of special education teachers as few prospective teachers are willing to venture into the special education field and, of those who do, roughly nine percent leave the profession after the first year (Horrison-Collier, 2013). Many of the vacancies are subsequently filled by teachers who lack the appropriate highly qualified status as outlined by No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (VanCise, 2013). It is estimated that over 80% of secondary special education teachers do not meet highly qualified status (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2009) as outlined in state and federal mandates.

Much of the research suggests that retention is the dominate problem associated with special education (Horrison-Collier, 2013) rather than recruitment (McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Responsibilities such as co-teaching, progress monitoring, developing individualized education plans (IEPs), accommodating student disabilities and modifying assignments, assessing, and assisting in planning curriculum has caused perspective teachers to think twice about entering into special education. Those novice teachers who enter the profession are statistically less likely to stay. For decades, turnover for special education teachers has been higher than turnover of general education teachers (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010) regardless of subject matter, demographics and other associated variables (Boeddeker, 2010). Consequently, it is highly probable that a teacher shortage will persist in the field of special education (Lemons, 2013).

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to examine the problems faced by two special education teachers during their first year in the field. Both participants in the study worked at the same middle school, but in separate classrooms. The main focus was to develop themes that shed light on those issues that contribute to novice special educators leaving the profession. It was hoped that these themes would prompt further discussion about how to remedy shortages in staffing special education teachers and, when positions are filled, retaining those teachers.

Literature Review

Paperwork

Because of federal and state mandates governing the education of students with disabilities, documentation of services is critical part of students' education plans. The average IEP can be 10 to 14 pages long, depending on the needs of the student. However, within the context of the document, the amount of data required to complete the IEP may seem overwhelming for even veteran teachers. In fact, many special education teachers report that their decision to leave the field was based on the paper requirements that were part of the job. Results from a study conducted by the U.S. Department of education indicated that teachers were overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork that was required as part of their professional duties, which impacted their ability to manage other aspects of their jobs (Klein, 2004). Special education teachers at the elementary and secondary grade levels report spending 53 percent more of their time on paperwork compared to any of aspect of their jobs, including attending IEP meetings, lesson planning or grading student assignments (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2013).

Administrative Support

Special education teachers have cited support from their administrators (Cancio, Albrecht & Johns, 2013) as being highly influential in terms of whether they leave or stay in the profession. Leadership support that focuses on teachers' professional and emotional needs was found to be successful in reducing attrition rates (Boeddeker, 2010), specifically if principals create human resource policies (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2007) tailored to the most essential needs of their teachers. Teachers who perceive remain in the field are more likely to perceive their administrators and the overall school climate as being supportive of them professionally (Bozonelos, 2008). In contrast, teachers who were not satisfied with the amount of support and feedback that they received from administrators were less likely to stay in their current job assignment, and many were inclined to leave the field of education altogether.

Teacher Burnout

Burnout occurs when an individual experiences job-related stress that impacts their physical, mental and emotional well-being. Haberman (2004) defined the term as "a condition in which teachers remain as paid employees but stop functioning as professionals. Teacher burnout is commonly cited as the reason special education teachers leave the profession, thus causing a critical shortage in classrooms across the country. As Berry (2011) describes it, burnout refers to job-related "fatigue, frustration or apathy that can result from periods of overwork and stress (p. 9)." Burnout can be the result of increasing paperwork requirements, stress associated with students who have physical, emotional and/or learning disabilities or lack of support from their

peers and administrators that leaves special education teachers feeling isolated (Billingsley, 2010), demoralized, exhausted and ineffective (Maslach, 1982).

Because of the high demands of paperwork, special education teachers have reported that they experience increased levels of stress and burnout, which becomes a huge factor in their decision to leave the profession (Mehrenberg, 2013). According to Suter & Giangreco (2009), special education teachers reported paperwork requirements that took an average of five hours a week to complete. Because of federal and state legal requirements, including student individualized education plans (IEPs), progress monitoring data collection and record keeping, many teachers believe that their ability to effectively provide instruction is eclipsed by the amount of paperwork they are required to complete as part of their job responsibilities. Moreover, the availability of school-based mentorships, constructive feedback or support systems may be nonexistent for special education teachers, causing even more stress and the potential for burnout.

Methods

A qualitative case study research design was used to describe the experiences of novice special education teachers from their own perspectives (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, the focus of this research included three themes: perceptions of administrative support, excessive paperwork, and teacher burnout and the likelihood of retention at the end of the school year. A qualitative design would allow for the development of additional thematic issues that could shed light on what contributes to these teachers' decision to leave or stay in the profession after their first year in the field. This paper describes the survey results and interview of two special education teachers in their first year of teaching at the middle school level. As Smith & Ingersoll (2004) pointed out, special educators are at high risk for turnover during the early stages of their careers, which makes the significance and rationale for this study even more important. Because of high attrition and low retention, there is a need to identify those factors that were most influential in teachers' decisions to stay in the field (Viel-Ruma, Houchings, Jolivette & Benson, 2010). This research will seek to provide insight into the teachers' needs for help and support during their first year of teaching and what other educators or administrators can do in order to support these novice teachers. Participants were chosen from a convenience sample of novice special education teachers from a local middle school in the state of North Carolina based on their willingness to be involved in the study.

Participants

The target population for the study was novice special education teachers. The two participating special educators worked at the same local middle school in inclusion classrooms. Both participants held a bachelor's degrees, one in social work and the other in special education. Neither of the participating teachers had ever taught in the classroom prior to this year's assignment, though one of the participants had completed her student teaching in a self-contained classroom at the elementary level.

Instrumentation

The study used survey data and interview questions that were sent to the two participating teachers through email. The survey was created with closed-ended questions that asked participants to rate their experiences based on whether they agreed, disagreed, somewhat agreed,

and somewhat disagreed with the questions that were being asked about the participants' perceptions of their need for support from administrators and/or mentors, their ability to complete paperwork and their ability to effectively manage their student case load. Although this study was strictly qualitative in nature, a larger scale study could be conducted in the future to gain a more quantitative result based on the same or similar questions posed to the participants of this study.

In addition to the survey, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that consisted of three open-ended questions and one suggestion that they felt would support the retention of novice special education teachers. The first question asked participants to list and describe four issues they have faced during their first year as a special education teacher. The second question asked participants to list four examples of support (i.e. mentoring, workshops) they have received during their first year as a special education teacher. The third question asked teachers the likelihood of them returning to special education after the first year and the four primary factors that have contributed to their decision. The questionnaire allowed for more detailed, candid responses than the survey would allow, providing additional insight into an issue that has not been extensively explored through quantitative or qualitative measures.

Procedures

A letter was sent to two prospective participants along with a copy of the survey and copy of the questionnaire. Participants were recommended based on their location at a local middle school and foreknowledge about their career status. Each prospect was assured that her identity and responses would remain anonymous. Once they agreed to take part in the research study, the participants were asked to complete both the survey and questionnaire within three weeks.

Findings

Open-Ended Responses

The responses to the open-ended questions about challenges faced as a first-year special education teacher were analyzed. During the analysis of the data, additional themes emerged that included: isolationism, time management, poor co-teaching relationships (Billingsley, 2010), the use of ineffective co-teaching models, student behavior (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), ambiguous special education practices and procedures, and negative perceptions of special education school wide.

Survey Responses

Results from the survey indicated that administrative support was the primary challenge for these first year special education teachers. They indicated that school administrators were not supportive of their needs and they felt isolated in the school. Both respondents either disagreed or somewhat disagreed with statements that, "I felt comfortable approaching administrators with my concerns," "I received support from my administrators," and "administrators are sensitive to my needs as a first year teacher."

Paperwork

Both survey participants agreed that paperwork requirements was the most critical challenge they faced during their first year. On the questionnaire, one participant shared, "I was asked to come

to the principal's office because I was late submitting my IEP paperwork. Even though I told the case manager that I was having problems completing the paperwork because of my co-teaching responsibilities, the response was that I would be written up if the late paperwork continued."

The second participant indicated similar concerns on her open-ended questionnaire, adding, "Progress monitoring and paperwork takes up a lot of time. I don't know how they expect us to teach and plan, too."

Administrative Support

Both participants disagreed that administrators supported them as first year teachers. They both disagreed with the statement that administrators were sensitive to their needs and both agreed that they felt isolated. On the questionnaire, one of the participants suggested that, "There is a shortage of special education teachers. Administrators need to build better relationships with the ones that they already have." As far as perceptions of mentorship, one of the participants agreed that her mentor was supportive while the other participant somewhat agreed with that statement on the survey,

Teacher Burnout

When asked whether they experienced job-related stress during their first year, both respondents agreed. However, neither respondent felt that their physical health had been impacted by the job-related stress that they experienced. On the open-ended questionnaire, both participants cited burnout or stress as an issue that they had experienced. One participant indicated, "I am definitely looking for another job. I can't take any more of this. Between administration and the teacher I am in the room with, I don't see myself coming back another year."

Additional Factors

Additional themes emerged during further analysis of the survey and questionnaire results, yielding more insight that could be useful in developing comprehensive plans for special educators during the first year. Participants identified issues that caused them some or frequent difficulty during their first years of teaching such as (a) poor co-teaching relationships (b) ineffective co-teaching practices (c) managing the accommodations and modifications of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom, (d) constant change of special education policies and procedures that impact paperwork requirements and classroom-based practices, (e) co-planning with the regular education teacher to create lesson plans for different levels of children in the inclusion classroom, and (f) inadequate preparation or training prior to entering the classroom for the first time. One the participants stated, "I was not prepared for the reality of being in special education. It was totally different from what I expected."

Discussion

There were three primary themes addressed in this study: administrative support (Hanson, 2011), the demands of paperwork (Imhoff, 2012) and job-related stress that contributed to the attrition or retention of first year special education teachers. A closed-ended survey and open-ended questionnaire was used to illicit responses from two novice special education teachers who were willing to lend their perspectives in an effort to provide somewhat of an understanding of the types of challenges and need for support during this initial phase of their careers.

Analysis of the data suggested that first-year special education teachers felt isolated within the school, lacking sufficient mentorships (Horrison-Collier, 2013) and administrative support. Increased levels of support from mentors and administrators (Roach, 2009) within the school would benefit a teacher who was in the beginning stages of their special education career if the support offered constructive feedback and suggestions for improving practice. Participants proposed that schools create a mentorship program dedicated specifically to the support and professional development of teachers who are new to the special education profession. There was a consensus between both participants that administrators were not supportive of their needs, and this was cited as the primary reason for their decision not to return to the classroom. At the conclusion of this study, one participant had given her two-week notice to resign her position while the other had indicated to the principal in writing that she would not return the following school year.

Further analysis indicated that the co-teaching relationship between the special education and the general education teachers was acrimonious and that co-teaching practices were not used in a way that benefitted students in the classroom. The regular education teacher provided much of the instruction, while the special education teacher served as more of a support role or assistant in the classroom. Special education teachers were also expected to collect data through progress monitoring in order to write student IEPs, as well as support all students in the inclusion classroom. They were faced with the task of implementing the components of the IEP within the context of the general education classroom as well as provide accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities as needed. Only one of the participants indicated that she needed additional support when it came to implementing the IEP, though both participants felt that the special education practices and procedures for their district lacked clarity. As a result, time management was somewhat of an issue when it came to creating a balance between paperwork requirements and expectations for co-teaching. While other themes emerged from the survey and questionnaire responses, there was no indication that these themes were major causal factors for either respondent's decision to not return after the end of the school year.

While this study employed a considerably small number of participants which, in effect, served as a limitation to the research, the findings are of interest because they provide some insight into specific factors that are most critical to the attrition and retention of special education teachers. Based on high turnover rates and significant shortages of special education teachers in schools across the United States (Imhoff, 2012), further research is needed to clarify the types of mentorships and support that would be most effective in meeting the needs of these teachers during their first year in the field.

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About the Author

Dr. Marquis C. Grant has been an educator for the past 11 years, seven of those years spent as a special education teacher in inclusion. She is also an adjunct professor with Grand Canyon University. Dr. Grant earned a master's degree in curriculum & instruction from the University of West Florida and a doctorate from Argosy University. As the parent of two boys with autism spectrum disorder, she has worked to bring awareness to children with ASD in school and in the community by presenting at conferences and writing for publication about issues ranging from school advocacy and using Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) to the perceived stress and coping of mothers of children with autism. She is also the founder of the non-profit organization *My Life My Autism*, dedicated to promoting awareness about autism through community outreach. Dr. Grant's publications include: *A Phenomenological Study of Culturally Responsiveness in Special Education* (Journal of Research Initiatives, January 2016 Special Edition); *Identifying and Correcting Barriers to Successful Inclusive Practices: A Literature Review* (Journal of American Academy of Special Education Professionals, winter 2016) *How to Advocate for Your Child's Free Appropriate Public Education* (Autism Spectrum Quarterly); *Are All Readers Created Equal* (Reading Today); *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly: Advocating for Children with Autism in School* (NASSET); *The New Segregation: An Analysis of Current Contexts of Inclusive Education* (ED546449); *Empowering Parents in the Special Education Process* (NASSET). She has also presented at North Carolina A & T State University, NCARE North Carolina Council for Exceptional Children Annual Conference and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Exceptional Children Conference. Contact: drmarquisgrant4@gmail.com