

High School Special Education Teacher retention:

Does the type of certification make a difference?

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Abstract

Special education teacher retention is a nation-wide issue that continues. Almost half of special education teachers leave the profession during their first five years of teaching. Though some studies have researched this issue, few studies have compared teacher preparation: specifically, traditional versus alternative certification programs. This study focused on the perceptions of traditionally and alternatively certified high school special education teachers regarding their intent on leaving or staying in the profession. Data is provided that substantiates retention is still a problem for both traditionally and alternatively certified high school special education teachers. Suggestions to increase special education teacher retention are provided.

The recruiting and retaining of the nation's teachers has become one of the top educational priorities in the United States. New teachers are leaving the field of education at a rapid and irreplaceable rate. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 50 percent of teachers will leave the education field within the first five years (Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, Morton, & Rowland, 2007). While there are many theories regarding the reasons new teachers are leaving the profession, the solutions are often limited due to funding, time, and even participation.

Over the past five years the shortage of teachers in special education has continued to rise to a point where schools consistently have chronic shortages of highly trained special education teachers; consequently under or untrained candidates are employed (Nichols, Bicard, Bicard & Casey, 2008; Boe, Shin & Cook, 2007; Boe & Cook, 2006 and Brownell & Smith, 1992). Add the shortage of highly qualified teachers to the attrition of teachers who teach special education, where an estimated 8%-10% of these teachers resign their positions annually (Wasburn-Moses, 2005), and the numbers of highly qualified special education teachers needed is greatly decreasing (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003). Compare this to the 6% attrition rate to general education teachers (Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002), which indicates that special education teachers are one and a half times more likely to resign their positions than general education teachers. When looking at the number of teachers hired who are less than fully qualified to teach special education in comparison to those hired in general education, the number of under qualified teachers hired is about two times as high in special education as in general education (Olivarez & Arnold, 2006; Nougaret, Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2005; and, Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). The shortage of special education teachers coupled with the attrition of those in the field is a significant problem facing the education system. A Georgia Professional

Standards Commission report of teacher shortages for the 2007-2008 school year indicated over 44% of special education teachers employed where without full certification (i.e., highly qualified). The report also indicated that approximately 10% of special education teachers left their positions. Almost every school system has reported the shortage of special education teachers. As a result, school systems are turning more and more to alternative certification routes to fill the special education positions with teachers who are not, but will be able to become, highly qualified. Approximately 22.5% of the teachers hired in Georgia are from alternate certification routes. Alternative certification programs continue to provide a significant number of special education teachers (Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar & Misra, 2007).

Traditional vs. Alternative Certification

In general, the two types of certification differ in three key ways; length and structure of the program, delivery method, and candidate demographics (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). Length and structure of the program refers to the amount of credits or instructional time required to attain certification. The delivery method is how the program instruction is provided to the learner. In this case, candidate demographic refers specifically to the age and prior work experiences of the teacher candidates.

Traditional certification programs are defined as a four or five year programs offered by universities where the learner focuses on the pedagogy needed to instruct students with special needs. The universities are held to strict guidelines from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, regional and state accreditation agencies, and professional organizations (Baines, 2006). The student spends a minimum of two years gaining expertise in the education of students including pedagogical expertise and behavior management. This training includes a regiment of courses (three to five semesters) designed to provide new teachers with the

curriculum knowledge to be successful upon entering the classroom. In a traditional program, instruction is provided to the learner through face to face classes and then the learner applies the gained knowledge through a series of practicum experiences. This provides multiple experiences for the teacher in training to practice using the gained knowledge and build a context in which to place the learning. Traditional programs take longer to complete than alternative routes to certification (ARC) and have a supervised internship prior to teacher certification.

Alternative routes to certification (ARC) are defined more by what they avoid in the program rather than what the program includes (Baines, 2006). Often, ARC programs use nontraditional methods for training individuals focusing on more field-based experiences rather than classes and a shorter time between beginning training and initial certification (Sindelar, Daunic & Rennells, 2004 and Baines, 2006). ARC programs are designed for the individual to gain expertise while teaching and are usually shorter than traditional certification programs (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). The length of the program varies but typical ones last between eighteen and twenty-four months from entering the program to full certification. In an ARC the learner is usually employed through a school system and they take classes on-line, weekends, and evenings, while being a teacher during the day (Tissington & Grow, 2007). The background of persons attracted to alternative certification programs tend to be older and have had a career prior to entering teaching (Honawar, 2006).

Implications on Retention

Special education teachers leave the profession at an alarming rate, during their first five years, creating new openings and forcing principals to find and hire replacements (Olivarez & Arnold, 2006). Approximately thirty percent of new teachers leave teaching within three years, and forty to fifty percent leave within five years (Ingersoll & Smith 2003). In a study from

1998-1999 in Connecticut, researchers (Fisk, Prowda & Beaudin, 2001) found alternatively certified teachers left the profession at twice the rate of those of having completed traditional education programs. Consequently, of those who had a brief training period prior to entering teaching, only half remained in the alternative certification program, the rest left the program before ever taking their first teaching position (Baines, 2006).

There is a demographic difference between those teachers who typically come through the traditional certification route and those choosing the alternative route. Typically teachers who enter education through alternative certification routes are older and of more diverse backgrounds. They are individuals who have had a career previously; often in business or the military therefore, the age of those in alternative certification programs tends to be greater than thirty-five. Some of the studies concluded the demographic characteristic of the special education teachers help indicate the likelihood that an individual will choose to leave the profession (Olivarez & Arnold, 2006). The literature suggests that those who enter the profession and who are older will be more likely to remain than those who are younger. A study by Whitaker (2000, p. 36) reported “the younger, less experienced teachers are among the most likely to leave the profession.” Given the studies cited it would seem that individuals who enter the profession through alternative certification routes are less likely to remain. However, the decisive piece of information is the amount of training an individual has prior to entering a classroom and little research has been conducted to correlate the certification program with the likelihood of remaining as a teacher. Fisk, Prowda & Beaudin (2001) remarked that alternatively-certified teachers left during the pre-tenure stage at nearly double the rates of fully certified teachers. If the teacher does not have educational experiences prior to entering the

classroom, they are more likely to leave the profession regardless of their age or other demographic indicators.

“The decision to leave the special education is often complex and the result of many factors” (Brownell, Smith, McNellis & Miller, 1997, p. 152). Shen, in his 1997 data analysis, concluded traditionally prepared teachers were more likely to respond favorably when asked about their plans to remain in the teaching profession until retirement than those who were certified through an ARC. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to consider the effectiveness of ARC programs that train special education personnel (Bauer, Johnson, & Sapona, 2004). “A closer look is needed at the role teacher preparation plays in the development of special educators’ career perceptions. . .and decisions to stay or leave” (Billingsley, 2004, p. 52).

Why Teachers Leave

Surprisingly, many of the reasons given for leaving the profession are consistent between general education and special education teachers. General education teachers and special education teachers state some of the major reasons for leaving education are: bureaucratic impediments, lack of support from the county office, low staff moral, a lack of resources, an unsupportive principal, and too little time for collaboration/planning. Special education teachers have additional unique situations: inadequate support for special needs students, lack of understanding from general education staff, and amount of individual education plans and related paperwork (Futernick, 2007 and Inman & Marlow, 2004). “Efforts to reduce attrition should be based on an understanding of factors that contribute to special educators’ decisions to leave the field” (Billingsley, 2004, p. 39.)

This study focused on the retention of teachers in a county in Northwest Georgia where teacher retention has become a major issue. The county high schools have also begun to face this

issue over the past three years. There are varying indications throughout the nation regarding why teachers are leaving in record numbers. The shortage of teachers in special education has continued to rise to a point where schools consistently have chronic shortages of highly trained teachers.

The loss of these teachers becomes a loss for the students and the school in several ways. The time spent to train these new teachers is lost when time the following school year has to be spent to train yet another batch of new teachers. The students lose out on having teachers who are comfortable in their subject area and have experiences teaching their subject area. The taxpayers lose out on the money spent to prepare these teachers to teach the children of the community and more money has to be spent to recruit and attempt to retain the new groups of teachers coming in. Stability is an often overlooked commodity for a school system. That stability is supplied through the retention of quality teachers.

This study examined the perceptions of high school special education teachers in a Northwest Georgia County who have been traditionally certified verses alternatively certified. The comparison between groups focused on the differences in perception regarding the likelihood that a teacher will remain in education as a teacher. Correlations will be made between the type of teacher preparation and the perception that the two groups of teachers have regarding educational practices, experiences, and the impact of each teacher's education on the likelihood they will remain a teacher in special education. Little work has been done to correlate the retention of teachers and the type of certification prior to entering the classroom. Therefore, understanding the impact of the training teachers receive prior to entering the profession is imperative to improving teacher retention.

Design and Analysis

This study is a quantitative research study. Respondents answered survey questions taken from a teacher retention survey used in California entitled: *A Possible Dream* (Futernick, 2007). The instrument was adapted to elicit responses from the participants about their perceptions of teaching using a rating scale and providing demographic data about themselves. The demographic information was used to group the responses. This allowed the researchers to analyze the correlations between responses and the preparation of the teacher providing the responses. Data was examined to determine if the type of certification impacted the likelihood that an individual will remain in special education as a teacher. Results from the survey are provided in the form of percentages to permit comparison among the sub groups which have different numbers of respondents. “The study of intent allows investigators to consider the relationship of teachers; career plans to a range of district variables, without the expensive and time-consuming task of finding those who left” (Billingsley, 2004, p. 40).

Results

The teacher retention survey was distributed electronically to 84 participants and 53 surveys were returned, which comprised a 63% response rate. Of those returned surveys, 69.8% were female, 20.7% were alternatively certified teachers, 79.2 % were white, 17% were African American and 1.9% were American Indian or Alaska Native. Interestingly the majority of special education teachers who were surveyed have a minimum of six years of educational teaching experience.

Table 1: Years of Teaching

Less than 1 year	7.5%
1-2 years	9.4%
3-5 years	18.9%
6 years +	64.2%

The most common reasons given for becoming a teacher were: a desire to work with children and/or adolescents, wanting to make a difference for children and society, a sense of calling, and a passion for teaching.

Remarkably, 54.7% of the teachers surveyed stated that they had not completed the certification requirements prior to being hired to teach special education but 81.1% are now certified to teach special education. Only 40% of those surveyed said that their credential program coursework prepared them to be successful in the school where they currently work.

When the participants were asked if they expected to leave teaching or transfer from their current school in the next two years, 22.6% stated that they were planning on leaving. This is consistent with the data reported in other teacher retention studies. All eleven of the teachers classified as alternatively certified indicated that they are planning on staying at the school in which they are currently employed for at least the next two years. Of those who reported they were planning on leaving all were in the traditionally certified group of teachers. This means that the percentage of traditionally certified teachers who are planning on leaving education is actually higher than that which has been reported in previous studies. Sadly, 66.7% of those who report leaving are among those teachers who have six or more years of teaching experience and were traditionally certified in special education.

When asked about the reasons for leaving, there was not one specific reason but, those given by the respondents were for personal reasons and not related to compensation and conditions where they were employed.

Table 2: Reasons for Leaving

Reasons for Leaving	Number of teachers
I plan to enter a graduate program or become a school administrator	1
I expect to be transferred to another school	1
I am leaving for other personal reasons (e.g., health, pregnancy, child rearing)	3
I plan to move away from the area	1
I want to pursue another line of work	1
I have discovered that, for personal reasons, teaching is not for me	2

Of the teachers surveyed, the group with six or more years of experience had only two alternatively certified teachers. All of the other teachers with six or more years of experience were trained through a traditional special education teacher program.

Often, when teachers are traditionally certified, they are entering the education profession as a first career. Those who are alternatively certified have had experiences in professions outside of education making education at least a second career choice. They are not under the illusion that working in the private sector does not have some of the same impediments found in education. All of the respondents who indicated they are leaving education were traditionally certified. This is an interesting contradiction to several studies previously cited.

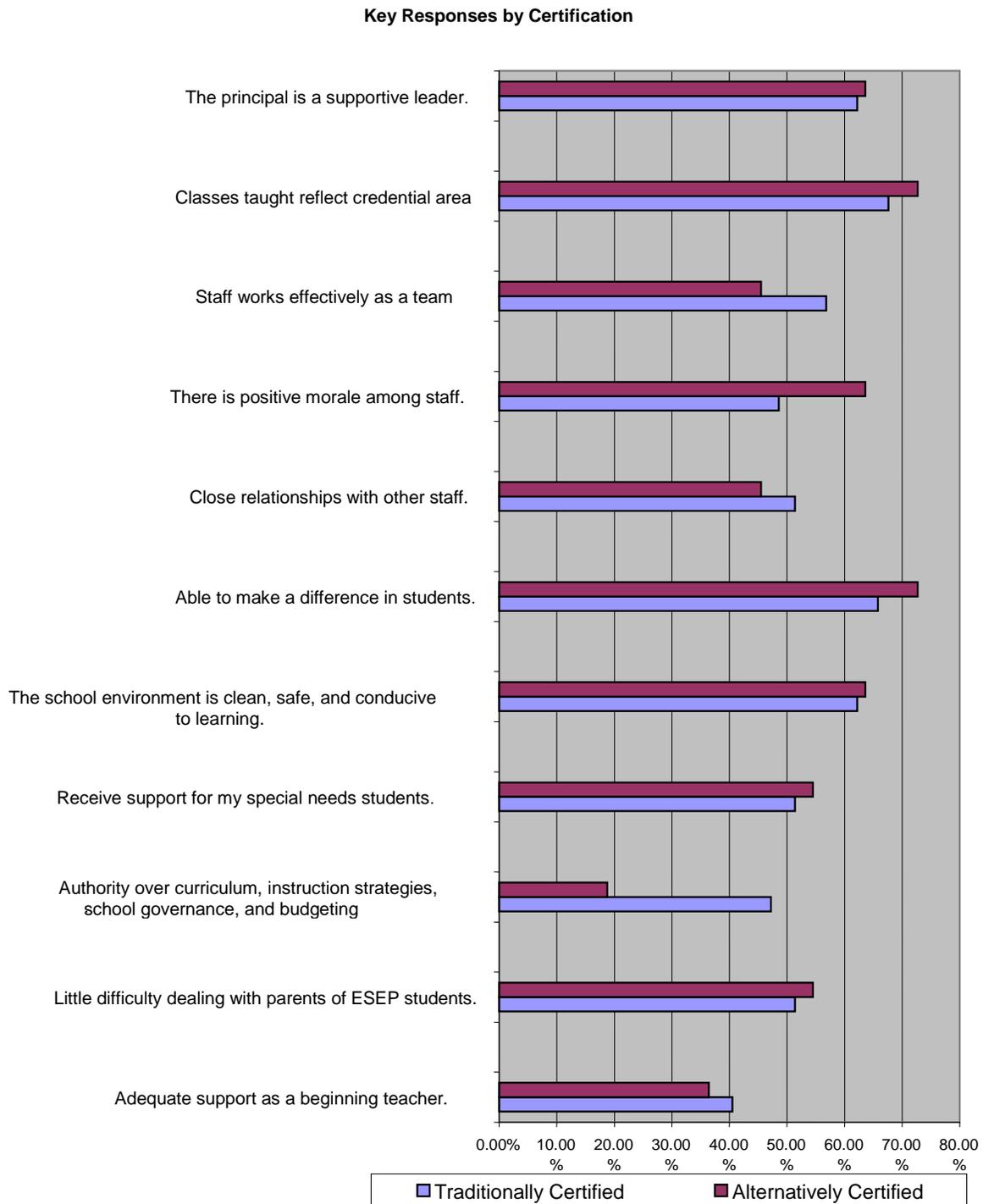
Their frame of reference for job expectations is drawn from the educational setting as well as current working conditions which are incongruent with the reasons teachers gave for wanting to become an educator. One hundred percent of the respondents indicated they entered education to impact the lives of students. All of the reasons given for leaving education have to do with duties and perceptions not with students.

Table 3: Conditions Impacting Decision to leave

There are too many bureaucratic impediments (e.g., paperwork, interruptions, unnecessary meetings)	40.0%
The school is not close to where I live.	36.4%
I am assigned to classes that are not appropriate given my credential and/or subject matter preparation.	33.3%
There is not an adequate understanding from colleagues about special education challenges.	33.3%
The administration and teaching staff are not given appropriate authority over curriculum, instruction strategies, school governance, and budgeting.	30.0%
IEP's and related paperwork are overly complex or laborious.	30.0%
Teachers are not respected by parents and members of the local community.	20.0%
The curriculum is too narrow or overly-scripted.	20.0%
My credential program coursework did not prepare me to be successful in this school.*	20.0%

Overall, when comparing responses provided from traditionally and alternatively certified teachers, there is not a tremendous difference in their perceptions. In most areas, with the exception of one, the responses were almost identical. Based on the responses, alternatively certified teachers feel like they are supported and part of the school culture, yet they indicated a lack of input in those other duties that fall within the responsibilities of being a teacher such as instructional strategies, budgeting, school governance, and authority over curriculum. The traditionally certified teachers felt they had greater authorities in the aforementioned areas.

Table 4: Comparison of Responses among Traditional and Alternatively Certified Teachers



Suggestions to improve retention

Prioritizing collaboration, creating a positive school climate, enhancing teacher professionalism, implementing a teacher mentor program, and improving working conditions have all been found to positively affect the attrition rates of special education teachers.

The retention of special education teachers is crucial for our students. The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (Carlson, Chen, Schroll & Klein, 2002) reported that limiting teacher turnover improves both student learning and the quality of teachers. With the increase in numbers of students served by special education and the increase in the number of emergency special education certifications issued to teachers, a crisis regarding the education of our special needs learners exists. We must find ways to attract and retain teachers in the special education field. While alternative certification programs attract many candidates, the long term retention of these individuals is questionable. Restructuring teacher preparation programs is one method to address teacher retention, but we must also provide the support, training, and quality work conditions to alleviate burn- out of these special educators.

Taking the time to build an atmosphere of support and respect among the staff is imperative to retaining teachers regardless of the type of certification. Special education teachers spend large amounts of time co-teaching and collaborating with general education teachers. A study by Shoho, Katims, and Meza (Washburn-Moses, 2005), suggested that in order to minimize stress and burnout, administrators should “create structures that enhance professional collegiality across traditional boundaries and a professional environment that values all participants. Allowing time for the co-teacher to meet and plan together is essential to building the relationships which can keep the special education teacher from feeling isolated and or ignored. This needs to change first through the certification programs offered in universities.

Special education teachers have classes, experiences, and requirements completely separate from the general education teachers. The two groups of teachers operate separate from each other while being educated and do not view each other as colleagues who need to work and understand each other's world. Special education teachers need to be viewed as teachers first and special education teachers second (Futernick, 2007).

Another suggestion is restructuring pre-service special education teacher programs. New challenges and pressures for teachers often lead the way regarding the attrition. These new challenges include the need to master new competencies, as well as provide differentiation to meet the needs of all students; often these are daunting tasks to veteran teachers. (McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). Teachers are not adequately prepared for the job of the special educator today, and university programs must offer courses that train the individual for needed skills such as time management, stress management, and collaboration approaches.

Administrators and district level supervisors should survey to determine their teachers' professional needs and suggestions for professional development. Even informal meetings can greatly assist in learning of the special education teacher role. In fact, the SPeNSE study (Carlson, Chen, Schroll & Klein, 2002) reports beginning special educators often found meeting with other new teachers or their special education colleagues to be more beneficial than formal in-services. For students to improve academically and teachers to grow professionally, personal staff development is a critical support for all teachers. As new research-based programs are recommended for special needs learners, training must be provided to teachers to acquire academic achievement for students while affirming an educator's effectiveness.

In Georgia, the retention of teachers, especially teachers with fewer than four years of experience is a problem that is on the rise, yet this study would indicate that a focus needs to be made to retain special education teachers who are highly qualified and have six or more years of experience. While there does not appear to be one conclusive reason for the high attrition rate among this population, it is apparent that school systems and universities need to collaborate to address various issues if they hope to significantly impact the problem. The issue is one of quality education for those students who need it most and retention of quality teachers is of paramount importance to that goal.

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