

Building Level Principals' Roles in Special Education Teacher Retention

Charlotte R. Gilbar

Lynchburg College

Attrition of special education teachers has steadily increased. The number of general education teachers that left teaching in 1991-1992 was 5.2% and in 2000-2001, it was 7.1%. Special education teachers followed the same upward trend but had an even more significant increase, in 1991-1992, it was 4.9% and in 2000-2001, it was 8.7%. The rate for general education teachers increased approximately 2% and the rate for special education teachers almost doubled (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008).

There are numerous reasons for special education teacher attrition. For purposes of this paper, I will look at specific variables related to work environment that the building principal can control. These factors are school climate, administrative support, colleague support, mentoring, and professional development.

Building level principals play a pivotal role in the retention of special education teachers. With increased effectiveness of leadership skills to address the aforementioned factors, a building principal could increase retention of special education teachers. Retaining effective special education teachers positively affects student achievement because there is continuity within the program.

As the pressure of school accountability due to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) increases, the need for continuity within a school becomes more important. In order for a building principal to construct a community of educators with a shared vision, there must be stability within the workforce. The retention of effective special education teachers is crucial to meeting the needs of students with disabilities. If highly qualified, experienced teachers commit to the profession thus effectively meeting the individual needs of students, the benchmarks set by NCLB legislation are more likely to be met.

Gehrke, R.S. & McCoy, K. (2007). Considering the context: Differences between the environments of beginning special educators who stay and those who leave. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 26(3), 32-40.

Increased legislative policies such as No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have intensified the need for highly qualified special educators. Gehrke and McCoy (2007) believe that more research must be done in order to effectively support new special education teachers. The research supports the fact that those teachers who perceive their work environment as supportive are more likely to remain at his/her current job.

Gehrke and McCoy (2007) conducted a study of the workplace from first year special education teachers' perspective. The study was conducted in four different districts both rural and urban. Each of the districts offered the same comprehensive national induction program. The researchers for this study specifically looked at professional growth and job satisfaction at the elementary and secondary level.

The researchers employed a mixed method approach. Data were collected through mailed questionnaires and interviews. The participants ranged in age from mid-twenties to fifty and taught in urban, suburban, small town, and rural settings. The teachers also taught in various settings ranging from self-contained to resource settings.

Gehrke and McCoy (2007) determined there were three workplace factors within the control of school personnel. They compared the findings of the questionnaire used in their study based on the factors developed by Johnson and Birkeland (2003), and Kletchtermans and Ballet (2002) as cited by Gehrke and McCoy (2007). These factors were "interacting with colleagues,

accessing resources that support teacher practice, and having opportunities for professional development growth” (p. 35).

Upon analysis of the questionnaire and interview data, Gehrke and McCoy found that, the special education teachers that stayed in special education (stayers) referred to “other special education teachers, mentors, and other school personnel (psychologists, administrators, etc.)” (p.35) as individuals that offered support more often than the special education teachers that moved to teaching general education. The first year teachers that changed jobs (movers) more often referred to “themselves, internet, or no help” when asked about welcoming colleagues (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007, p. 35). Additionally, the stayers had a broader network of supporters than the movers did.

The stayers also had more access to resources than the movers did as was evidenced through the interviews and questionnaires. Gehrke and McCoy (2007) concluded that the stayers did not only have greater access to resources but were able to align the resources to the curriculum and use them effectively for instruction.

Within the realm of professional growth, only one mover indicated that he had any professional growth opportunities, while all of the stayers noted that they had meaningful professional development opportunities. The stayers valued attending professional development on classroom management, release time to observe veteran teachers, and structured time to meet with other first year teachers (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007).

Gehrke and McCoy (2007) concluded that regardless of the size of the school district, those new special education teachers that had “a more easily accessible network of supportive persons and resources” were more apt to remain a second year teaching special education (p. 38).

The use of mixed method was appropriate for this study. The researchers were able to use qualitative information that was categorized for themes and descriptive statistics were used on the questionnaire. To formulate the questionnaire, the researchers used the analysis and review of the current research. This allowed for a valid and reliable questionnaire because the questions had been used in previous studies. The researchers did not discuss limitations of the research. The participants were from a broad range of school settings making the research more generalizable, however the small number of participants served as a limitation. The researchers controlled one variable, which was the number of years' experience by only using data from first year teachers.

Berry, A.B, Petrin, R. A., Gravelle, M.L., & Farmer, T.W. (2001). Issues in special education teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development: Considerations in supporting rural teachers. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 30(4), 3-11.

Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, and Farmer (2011) developed four research questions to address through their study. For the purpose of this paper, I am going to discuss the three that are most relevant. The research questions were “a) What is the current picture of rural special education teacher recruitment and retention? b) What professional development provided by the district do teachers report as helpful to them?, c) What additional topics would teachers find helpful if they were provided?” (p. 4).

The researchers conducted telephone interviews in which surveys with open ended and multiple-choice questions were used. There were 203 special educators from 30 states that were employed in a rural school that participated in this study. The rural districts were identified as rural if they were eligible for the Rural Education Achievement Program.

From these interviews, there were four topics of interest for teachers in regards to professional development. These areas were working with paraprofessionals, working with parents, training in a specific disability category, and inclusion (Berry et al., 2011).

The lack of preparation to instruct students with diverse disabilities was a factor that affected attrition in rural areas. There is a shortage of special education teachers in rural areas because it is difficult to attract them for numerous reasons and this shortage impacts the quality of candidates that are available. Thus, administrators sometimes are forced to hire teachers that are not highly qualified. Within Berry et al.'s (2011) study, one-third of the special education teachers reported that they taught students out of their certification area. Furthermore, in the interviews, one-third of the special education teachers reported that they planned to leave their position the next year. Berry et al. (2011) suggested that one way to combat attrition in rural schools is to offer further training. Additional professional development would provide special educational teachers with support to face the challenges and responsibilities of being a rural special education teacher.

Berry et al. (2011) used focus groups to develop the surveys. The focus groups allowed for more reliability because the researchers used the knowledge gained from the focus groups in addition to the body of research on retention. The researchers conducted the interviews via the telephone. The researchers however did not conduct the interviews themselves. They trained interviewers to conduct the open-ended interviews and then held follow-up training sessions to control for the variable of different interviewers. It was imperative that Berry et al. had well-trained interviewers because of the number of participants. This study used a large number of participants, with a 76% participation rate for administrators and an 84% participation rate for teachers. The researchers clearly described their data analysis and reported an inter-rater

reliability of 95%. I believe the research holds more validity due to the techniques that Berry et al. used to control variables for such a large study. This study was very specific and is generalizable to most rural areas because of the national scope of the research. One consideration that I feel limited this study was the researchers' findings were based on teachers' reports that they planned to leave the profession. The study would be strengthened by the use of actual attrition data of the participants.

Prather-Jones, B. (2011). How school administrators influence the retention of teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *The Clearing House*, 84(1), 1-8.

Prather-Jones (2011) studied the body of research on teacher retention and its relationship with administrative support. She accepted that there is a relationship that exists but what is missing is "what administrative support means" (Prather-Jones, 2011, p. 2). Using a snowball sampling technique, 13 participants were identified for the study. All of the participants were current special education teachers serving students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities, they had taught for at least 7 years, and lived in the Midwest. The teachers worked in various settings. The researcher conducted face-to-face in depth interviews with each participant. The interview was semi-structured and usually began with structured questions but lead to informal conversations. The participants were interviewed within their school setting. The researcher conducted a focus group to triangulate the data. She also conducted member checking by providing participants with the initial findings to ensure accuracy. Prather-Jones coded the findings from the interviews inductively and deductively using the categories of external, employment, and personal factors based on Billingsley's (1993) research.

Prather-Jones (2011) found “that administrative support was key to these teachers’ decisions regarding their careers” (p. 4). Three themes emerged from Prather-Jones’s research.

The themes were:

1. Teachers looked to principals to enforce reasonable consequences for student misconduct, and to include them in the decision-making behind these consequences.
2. Teachers felt supported by principals who make them feel respected and appreciated.
3. Teachers need support from the other teachers in their schools, and principals play an important role in developing these relationships (Prather-Jones, 2011, p. 4-5)

Overall, the participants in this study indicated that support was a critical variable that determined whether they remained teachers in special education. Prather-Jones (2011) recommended that principals develop their knowledge of the aims of special education. She purported that if principals are better prepared to support special education teachers that they can play an important role in reducing attrition and the shortage of special education teachers.

This study looked primarily at special education teachers that work with students with emotional disabilities that controlled for the type of certification within the study. However, the participants had various different years’ of experience. Each of 13 participants was interviewed once but five were interviewed twice. The researchers did not address the reason for the different number of interviews but it could be seen as a weakness of the study. There was a small number of participants so the generalizability of the study is limited. The researchers did triangulate the study, which increased the strength of the study.

Gersten, R., Keating, T., Yovanoff, P., & Harniss, M.K. (2001). Working in special education: Factors that enhance special educators' intent to stay. *Exceptional Children*, 67(4), 549-567.

Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (2001) studied special education attrition and retention through a path analysis. The researchers hypothesized that not only factors from previous research such as administrative support, commitment, and job satisfaction but also that job design played a role in retention of special education teachers. They looked at whether the job "made sense" as it was designed (Gersten et al., 2001). A 125-item survey was conducted in three urban school districts. When analyzing the data, Gersten et al., used eight path analysis variables, "support from principal and teachers, central office support, professional development opportunities, role dissonance, stress due to job design, satisfaction with current position, commitment to the profession, and years of special education service" (p. 555-556). The criterion variable was the intent to stay and the researchers followed teachers who had expressed interest in leaving the special education field. Thirty-three teachers expressed the intent to leave.

Gersten et al. (2001) found that it was not only the building principal but also the collective culture of the teaching staff in addition to the principal that influenced the level of support that a special education teacher felt. The support from the principal and other teachers was a direct factor that influenced professional development opportunities, role dissonance, and satisfaction with current role (Gersten et al., 2001). The researchers found that understanding special education teachers' roles was important in order to show support. There were three main suggestions that they gave as low cost ways to show support for special educators: providing professional development opportunities, listening and assisting teachers to talk through problems, and creating a school culture that encourages supporting colleagues. While central

office staff is a factor for retention of special education teachers, the role is not as large as the building principal's role.

Professional development opportunities that are supported by lines of clear communication affect commitment to the profession. However, professional development alone is not the answer to increasing retention. Gersten et al. (2001) looked at job design and stress due to job design. Stress due to job design negatively affects special education teachers' commitment to the profession. The stressors that were identified in the research were paperwork, student ranges in performance, meetings, and lack of autonomy. If these stressors are controlled than the negative affect is reduced and would boost retention of special education teachers (Gersten et al., 2001). The researchers concluded that there is further study needed on special education job design. Due to poor job design, teachers felt additional stress.

Gersten et al. (2001) clearly described the methodology and data analysis used within their study. The sample size within this study was large. Eight hundred eighty-seven special education teachers were surveyed from large urban districts. There was a response rate of 81%. The researchers did note that the use of intent to leave as a predictor of future behavior had recently "been criticized" in the literature (p. 556). Gersten et al. followed through with their research to correlate the relationship between intent and action, which I believe strengthened their findings.

Rhodes, W. (2012). Attrition and retention of special education teachers in an urban high school.

(Doctoral Dissertation), Retrieved April 24, 2012, from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text. (UMI No. 3503065).

Rhodes (2012) studied attrition of special education teachers in one high school. She collected data through one-on-one interviews and reviewed historical data from the high school

on retention practices and mentoring. In her dissertation, Rhodes found that support of the administration was a factor in attrition and retention for special education teachers. Lack of administrative support was a factor that teachers noted as a reason to leave a building. Positive administrative support was also a factor for special education teachers to remain in a current job.

Rhodes (2012) conducted a qualitative case study of Hawk High School. There were three research questions.

1. What factors influenced some teachers to leave their positions in the special education department at Hawk High School?
 2. What factors influence early career special education teachers' decision to stay in their positions at Hawk High School beyond their first year appointment?
 3. What retention strategies were used to retain early career special education teachers in their positions at Hawk High School?
- (p. 10).

Rhodes (2012) concluded that most special education teachers felt “the students were the best part of their job” and “the paperwork was the worst part of teaching special education” (p. 167). Rhodes also found that teachers at Hawk High left because the lack of collegiality within the special education department and the lack of support of administrators. Additionally, she found that the mentor program utilized by Hawk High was beneficial to increase retention rates within the special education department. Overall, Rhodes' study concurred with the body of literature on special education teacher retention. Thus, she feels that her research is significant because it adds to the body of literature.

The researcher clearly stated the limitations of the study including size and focus of the study. I concur with Rhodes that this study could not be generalized to other subject areas because of the focus on special education teachers. The researcher felt the use of interviews limited the study because the data was self-reported and participants may not answer honestly. The researcher did not discuss how she controlled for her own bias as the interviewer.

Evaluation of Current Findings

Billingsley (2003) conducted a critical analysis of the literature on teacher retention and attrition for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education. She defined three categories of characteristics that affect special education teacher attrition and retention. The categories are personal factors, teacher qualification, and work environment. For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on work environment.

School climate is a broad variable within work environment. School climate was measured by safety; necessary resources are available and supportive behavior by colleagues. School climate addresses the question is the school a good place to work? (Billingsley 2003).

From analysis of the literature, the number one variable to enhance retention of special education teachers is the amount of support that they feel they receive. For example, Gehrke and McCoy (2007) stated that regardless of size school districts that provide accessible support are more likely to stay a second year. Additionally, Prather-Jones' (2011) study concluded that a support system is a critical variable in retaining special education teachers. The support can come from administrators, colleagues, or in the form of professional development. All five articles that I analyzed contained research that reinforced the need for supportive colleagues and a supportive principal as essential factors that must be present for special educators to choose to stay in their current position.

Throughout the five studies included in this literature review, there are common themes that are discussed by the researchers. The theme of increased support from administrators and colleagues was one of the most important factors in increased retention of special education teachers (Gersten et al., 2001, Gehrke & McCoy, 2007, Prather-Jones, 2011, Rhodes, 2012). Through increased support, special education teachers felt that they could accomplish and master the varied responsibilities of their job description. Additionally, Gehrke and McCoy (2007), Rhodes (2012), Gersten et al. (2001), and Berry et al. (2011) reported increased professional development was a contributor to increased retention of special education teachers.

The current findings from the studies within this literature review support the strategies discussed in *A Practical Guide of Strategies and Activities for Educators and Administrators* (1998). The suggested effective strategies supported by the aforementioned research were “teachers need and to provide professional development opportunities” (p.6-8). These findings are important for effective principals to understand and study in order to retain effective special education teachers.

Leadership Implications

The body of research has great implications for school administrators. While a school administrator cannot guarantee that a teacher will remain in a position, there are some factors within his/her control that increases retention. The school administrator must create a positive school climate with a clear vision. The principal communicates the vision to all teachers and must incorporate an expectation of collaboration within the vision. Through this positive vision and collaborative atmosphere, the principal cultivates a culture of support. Support of both the administrator and of other teachers is important for the retention of special education teachers. With increased retention rates, there will be less teacher turnover.

In addition to ensuring a supportive environment, implementation of a systematic mentoring program will be beneficial for new special education teachers. A systematic mentoring and induction program will give more assistance to novice teachers. The first three years of new teachers' careers are important to the effective development of skill sets needed to be an efficient special education teacher. A mentor can assist the novice teacher in understanding the procedures for the mandated paperwork to ensure compliance with federal law. The program will also systematically expect teachers to learn to reflect on teaching practice with the hope of developing autonomy. Increased autonomy will likely have a positive impact on student achievement.

Special education teachers that have sustained experience and reflective practice will be able to advocate for the professional development that they need. An educational leader will need to provide appropriate professional development to meet the needs of special education teachers. Through professional development, special education teachers will be able to stay abreast of current special education issues and strategies. Ultimately, educational leaders who put the aforementioned strategies into place will not only help special education teachers but all teachers.

References

- Billingsley, B.S. (2003). *Special education teacher retention and attrition: A critical analysis of the literature*. (COPSSSE Document No. RS-2). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education.
- Berry, A.B, Petrin, R. A., Gravelle, M.L., & Farmer, T.W. (2011). Issues in special education teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development: Considerations in supporting rural teachers. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 30(4), 3-11.
- Boe, E.E, Cook, L. H., & Sunderland, R.J. (2008). Teacher turnover: Examining exit attrition, teaching area transfer and school migration. *Exceptional Children* 75(1), 7-31).
- Bozonelos, J. (2008). Retention in special education: Reducing attrition through supportive administrative interventions. *The International Journal of Learning*, 15(1), 149-157.
- Gehrke, R.S. & McCoy, K. (2007). Considering the context: Differences between the environments of beginning special educators who stay and those who leave. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 26(3), 32-40.
- Gersten, R., Keating, T., Yovanoff, P., & Harniss, M.K. (2001). Working in special education: Factors that enhance special educators' intent to stay. *Exceptional Children*, 67(4), 549-567.
- The National Clearinghouse for Professionals in Special Education. (1998). *Retention of special education professionals: A practical guide of strategies and activities for educators and administrators*. Virginia.
- Prather-Jones, B. (2011). How school administrators influence the retention of teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *The Clearing House*, 84(1) 1-8.

Rhodes, W. (2012). Attrition and retention of special education teachers in an urban high school.

(Doctoral Dissertation), Retrieved April 24, 2012, from Dissertations & Theses: Full

Text. (UMI No. 3503065).