

The Role of Personal Characteristics and Job Support in Retaining Teachers of Students
with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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Abstract

This study was a qualitative investigation of the reasons that experienced teachers of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders give for remaining in that field. The findings of this study indicate that these teachers' decisions to remain in the profession of teaching students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders were most strongly influenced by both having a sufficient level of support and having certain personal characteristics which they felt made them a good fit for this field. Implications of these findings suggest that changes in recruitment and advising, teacher preparation and professional development opportunities, and processes for providing support to new teachers are needed in order to increase the retention of teachers in this profession.

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The supply and demand of special education teachers in America has been of concern for decades (Billingsley, 2002). While the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 97) reconfirms our nation's dedication to providing children and youth with disabilities a free and appropriate education (Ax, Conderman, & Stephens, 2001), delivery of educational services to children with disabilities requires a sufficient number of teachers qualified to deliver such services (Cooley & Yavonoff, 1996). Yet special education teachers are more likely to leave teaching than other teacher groups (Ingersoll, 2001). The increase in the number of special education positions, the decrease in the number of newly licensed teachers graduating from teacher preparation programs, and the high attrition rates in special education have contributed to a critical shortage of teachers in the field of special education (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, & Weber, 1995; Lauritzen & Friedman, 1991).

The field of emotional and/or behavioral disorders exhibits one of the most critical teacher shortages (George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995). Among all special education categories, this field exhibits the highest rates of attrition (Brownell, Smith, & Miller, 1994; Pullis, 1992), and teachers in this field have shorter careers than those of students with learning disabilities, physical impairments, or mental retardation (Singer, 1993). The U.S. Department of Education reported that during 1999-2000, one-fourth of the nation's positions for teachers of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders were left vacant, or filled by substitutes, because candidates holding the appropriate certification could not be found (Division of Education Services, 2001).

Several scholars argue that the retention of teachers – rather than training of additional ones – is a critical part of solving the shortage problem in special education (Boe et al., 1995; Billingsley, 2002). Boe et al. (1995), for example, note that the source of jobs from attrition in special education is approximately 50%, whereas expansion of the teaching force accounts for only 19.5% of available teaching jobs. Maintaining effective programs in special education, therefore, depends upon the retention of qualified and committed teachers (Brownell & Smith, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that may contribute to the retention of teachers of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders. In-depth interviews were conducted with veteran teachers in the field in an attempt to discover not only the factors these teachers believed were significant to their retention, but also their perceptions regarding the specific nature and impact of these factors. The majority of previous attrition studies have focused on the effects of district and school working conditions, job assignment factors, and teachers' affective responses to their careers (e.g. Carlson & Billingsley, 2001; George et al., 1995). The relationship between teachers' personal characteristics and retention and attrition, on the other hand, has been understudied in special education research, and research on teachers' more cognitive and affective personal characteristics, such as motivation, interests, expectations, and/or personality factors have been virtually unstudied in special education attrition/retention research (Billingsley, 1993).

In addition, the existing research on teacher attrition and retention consists primarily of survey research focusing on factors that lead to special education teachers' feelings of dissatisfaction with their job and consideration of leaving the field. Relatively

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little attention has been given to teachers who are satisfied in their work and who have remained in/or plan to remain in their positions for a considerable length of time. This lack of qualitative data, as well as this one-sided view of the issue, seriously limits this body of research. This study, therefore, used in-depth interviews to learn about teachers' experiences and the factors they believe have influenced their career decisions.

Methods

This study used in-depth interviews to learn about the teachers' experiences and the factors they believe have influenced their career decisions. Convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used to obtain the thirteen teachers who participated in the study. All were teachers of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders who had been teaching this population for seven or more consecutive years. Teachers in self-contained, resource, and inclusive settings were included. Participating teachers taught in a variety of schools in a Midwest metropolitan area, including public elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as alternative schools for special populations. Schools varied in size and the socioeconomic status of the students they served, ranging from 40 to 1,230 total students and 4% to 100% of students qualifying for the free/reduced lunch program. Participants varied in age, from 37 to 56 years, included both males and females, and had from 7 to 28 years of experience teaching students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders.

Each participant was interviewed on either one or two occasions in his/her school setting, with the first five participants being interviewed twice. A focus group was also conducted at a central location with seven of the participants. Total interview time spent with each candidate ranged from 45 minutes to 210 minutes, with a mean of 120 minutes.

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Each teacher's interview transcripts were analyzed individually and patterns that contributed to answering research questions were sought within and across cases. Once patterns were established, transcripts were searched for discrepant information that might run counter to these patterns.

Findings: Support and a "Good Fit"

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Data from interviews suggested that two main factors – having support and being a “good fit” – may have been the most important variables affecting the retention and/or attrition of these teachers. Participants believed that both factors were necessary for a long-term career in this profession and that neither was adequate in itself. This central finding implies that the retention and attrition of teachers for this population is directly and strongly affected not only by workplace conditions, as indicated in the majority of the existing literature, but also by the personal characteristics teachers bring with them to the position. In addition, these findings suggest that personal characteristics may be even more important than workplace conditions, because if the appropriate personal characteristics are in place, teachers are likely to remain in the field, although they may choose to leave an unsatisfactory work environment.

Support

When discussing the relationship between workplace conditions and their career decisions, study participants focused on issues of support from both their administrators and colleagues. Administrative support was most important to these teachers in the form of effecting appropriate disciplinary actions (and including them in the decision-making behind these actions) and making them feel respected and appreciated. The important aspects of collegial support included having support from other teachers of students with

emotional and/or behavioral disorders, as well as having the support of the general education teachers within their schools. Teachers felt that it was especially important to have colleagues who were in similar teaching situations to share their ideas and experiences with. They believed general educators offered the most support by exhibiting acceptance of students identified as having emotional and/behavioral disorders. The teachers in this study believed that having support was especially critical during their initial years of teaching in the field. In fact, many of the teachers reported that if they had not had adequate support during their first year in the field they would have very likely not continued in the profession past that year. Teachers also indicated that as they gained experience, their need for a high level of support decreased.

However, participants indicated that having these sources of support, in and of itself, was not a sufficient explanation for why they had remained in the profession for an extended period of time. They also believed that certain personal characteristics that made one a “good fit” or suitable for a career in this field were critical in their own and in other teachers’ decisions to remain in or leave this profession.

A Good Fit

The teachers in this study believed that individuals, including themselves, who are able to remain in the profession of educating students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders need to have or acquire certain personal characteristics. They felt that having these characteristics made one a "good fit" for the profession, whereas not having them could indicate that someone was "unsuitable" or not "cut out" for a career in this field. Teachers indicated several characteristics that contributed to being a good fit for this population of students. One such characteristic involved enjoying the variety their

positions offered. When asked what they liked about their jobs, many referred to feeling challenged, enjoying the excitement, and not being able to predict a day's outcomes. For example, Linda said, "They always keep you on your toes and it's never the same day twice." And Alice reported, "There is never a dull moment, that is for sure, you don't get bored."

All thirteen teachers believed that having the ability not to take students' actions and vocalizations personally was critical for a long-term career in teaching students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders. For example, Chris explained that a teacher in this field has to be able to disregard being called names by their students, especially because the teacher is likely not the true target of the attack:

You can't get bent out of shape when they say something derogatory towards you. A lot of times they are going to come in and call you the "B" word and they are going to be thinking about their mama or their sister or their daughter and something that happened last night. It takes a lot when someone calls you a name not to say anything. You must understand the child or student you are dealing with.

When asked why she believed teachers left the field, Jill indicated that it was because they couldn't learn to separate themselves from students' behaviors; she said, "I think it's because they take what kids do personally. It really is an unhealthy situation if you take it personally."

Two other characteristics stood out. One was intrinsic motivation. These teachers did not commonly get to experience significant student successes, they did not receive any more pay than general education teachers, and they often had to deal with student

behaviors that would have made most individuals view the position as quite unpleasant. And yet, these teachers felt rewarded by what they did. They were able to find these rewards from even minute student achievements, from slight gestures of appreciation, and, even more so, from within themselves. The second was understanding and accepting their limitations. The teachers interviewed shared the perspective that this is not a field in which someone will necessarily make huge academic or social gains with every student and that not all of the problems these students encounter can be solved. Still other characteristics these teachers believed were needed to be a good fit for teaching in this field included being flexible, having an interest in children with emotional and/or behavioral disorders, and having a strong commitment to the profession. Teachers felt that individuals who did not possess these characteristics were unsuitable for this career and that they were likely to leave the profession.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study indicate that both workplace conditions, specifically support, and personal characteristics, especially those that make one a good fit, are directly related to teachers' decisions to remain in the field of educating students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders. Participants' emphasis on the relationship between specific personal factors and retention in educating students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders indicates that these personal factors play a more significant role in teachers' career decisions than past research has indicated. This is important because the majority of current retention efforts focus exclusively on making changes to workplace conditions, such as caseload size and paperwork demands, and virtually ignore the

personal factors that might be involved in teachers' decisions to remain in or leave special education.

These findings have two important implications for teacher education programs and school district support programs. First, recruitment and advising practices need to take into account teachers' personal characteristics, such as their interests, motivations, and personalities, in order to make more appropriate recommendations regarding who should pursue a career in this field. For example, if an individual exhibits a need for constant routine and control and indicates a lack of flexibility, it would not be appropriate for them to be directed into a career in teaching students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders.

In addition, schools and universities need to find ways to support teachers of students with emotional and/or behavior disorders during their beginning teaching years. The teachers in this study had to seek this support for themselves, in the forms of peer groups from teacher education programs, mentor teachers, and/or co-workers. One could posit that teachers who are given strong support during their initial years as teachers of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders are able to maintain those positions long enough to gain the experience, skills, and outlooks needed in order to remain in that field for an extended period of time. Schools and universities need to have specific plans in place that focus on supporting beginning teachers in this field.

These findings also suggest a number of productive areas for future research. One area of investigation might focus on the sources and types of support provided to teachers in this field, and how those specific levels of supports affect their career decisions.

Another line of inquiry should seek to evaluate the effects of different teacher preparation

programs, as well as professional development opportunities, on special education teachers and their career decisions. Do some programs result in longer or shorter investments in teaching? What aspects of programs/professional development opportunities do teachers find most beneficial? Finally, research that investigates the importance of personal factors, including teachers' interests, motivations, and personalities, should be a primary focus of additional research in this area. The findings of this study indicate that these factors play a substantial role in the career decisions of teachers working with students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders and they should no longer be overlooked.

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