Promoting Special Educator Teacher Retention: A Critical Review of the Literature

Jeremy E. Vittek

Abstract
This article is a critical review of the literature on special education teacher attrition and retention. The research focuses on journal articles from 2004 to present. The results of the study helped define special educator attrition and retention. The major themes present in the findings were job satisfaction, administrative support, induction programs, and mentoring. The literature shows a clear need for comprehensive administrative support to improve job satisfaction and the likelihood a special educator will remain in their job.

Keywords
teacher preparation, attrition, retention

There is a severe shortage of special education teachers in this country, which has increased over the last decade (Payne, 2005). There are not enough special educators each year to fill the vacancies in the field. The attrition rate of special educators, especially in the early years of their careers, is considered a major reason for the teacher shortage (Billingsley, 2007; Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003; Leko & Smith, 2010). Currently, 13.2% of special educators leave their jobs each year (Plash & Piotrowski, 2006). Teacher attrition in special education has led to many jobs left vacant, later filled by uncertified teachers. Provost (2009) states, “Nine of the 13 educational fields identified by the American Association for Employment in Education (2008) as areas of considerable shortage are in special education” (p. 105). The high turnover rate has a negative effect on students as well as the district as a whole. Billingsley (2004a) posited that future research efforts should focus on how to retain teachers.

The factors that contribute to the teacher shortage in special education are wide reaching, ranging from preparation programs to the support a teacher receives their first few years as an educator. Researchers of this topic have focused on a variety of factors that influence a special educator’s decision to remain in, or leave, the field of special education (Griffin et al., 2009). In her first critical review of the literature, Billingsley (1993) divided these factors into three categories: external, employment, and personal.

Many of the studies produced conflicting results on whether certain variables promoted attrition or retention. For instance, Metzke (1988; as cited in Billingsley, 1993) reported the inverse to be true. Billingsley (1993) attributed this phenomenon to “the varied definitions of attrition used, and failure to statistically control for relevant demographic factors” (p. 150). Subsequent studies have produced results consistent with Metzke (1988) who suggested uncertified special educators leave the field more frequently than fully certified special educators.

The research became more focused on specific variables from 1992 to 2004, which marks the time period covered in Billingsley’s second review of the literature. Billingsley (2004b) examined research of demographic factors on attrition. She determined that gender and race do not have a correlation with attrition, but age does. Younger special educators leave the field more frequently than veteran special educators (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997).

Given the gap between the number of special education teachers available and the number of jobs to be filled increases each year, a critical examination of the literature is imperative in determining factors relating to both attrition and retention (Boe & Cook, 2006). This review of the literature focuses on the following aspects of teacher retention and attrition in special education: (a) definition of attrition and retention, (b)
characteristics of teachers who remain in their jobs and those who leave the field, (c) job satisfaction, (d) administrative support, (e) induction programs, and (f) mentoring. In addition, implications for future research will be presented. The question this research will attempt to answer is as follows: What variables lead to special educator attrition and retention?

**Method**

The articles referenced in this literature review were found by searching ERIC on the online database EbscoHost. The search parameters were special education teacher attrition, retention, mobility, and turnover. The terms were searched separately, as well as in combinations with the root term "special education." The initial search of the term "special education teacher attrition" returned 228 results. After refining the search to only include peer-reviewed journals from 2004 to present, the search yielded 34 results. Reference pages for each article from the initial search were examined to find more articles. For this literature review, journals from to present were used. The articles prior to 2004 were reviewed by Billingsley in (1993) and (2004b).

**Results**

**Definition of Attrition and Retention**

Special educator attrition and retention are defined using a variety of terms. This document will use the terms outlined in Billingsley’s (1993) review of the literature. If a special educator remains in the same position as the previous year, it is called absolute retention (Boe, 1990). If a special educator stays in the field, but takes another position, it is labeled “transfers to another special education teaching position.” When special educators transfer to general education positions, it is called “transfers to general education teaching” (Billingsley, 1993). The final group, “exit attrition,” is for special educators who leave the field of education. Although each group causes problems for the field of special education, exit attrition is the most serious outcome because it reduces the overall teacher workforce (Boe et al., 1997).

**Demographics of Attrition**

Many variables and characteristics have been studied to determine their correlation with special education teacher attrition. Among the studied characteristics are age, gender, experience, and level of education. Olivarez and Arnold (2006) surveyed 228 teachers in south Texas and determined the average special education teacher who remained in the field is Caucasian, has earned a bachelor’s degree, and is at least 30 years old. However, the researchers admit other characteristics must be cross-referenced to have predictive value relating to teacher retention. In her review of the literature, Billingsley (2004b) states, “Age is the only demographic variable that is consistently linked to attrition in the special education literature” (p. 43). Younger special educators leave the field at a higher rate when compared with veteran special educators. This can be attributed to the normal occurrences of teacher attrition during the first few years of a teacher’s career, combined with the inability to properly manage the stressors of special education (Nance & Calabrese, 2009; Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). However, Connelly and Graham (2009) posit a more significant student teaching experience may decrease an early career special educator’s intent to leave the field. The research regarding the correlation between gender and special educator attrition has been inconclusive (Billingsley, 2004b). Although age and years of teaching experience are correlated with attrition, the scope of current research is trending toward external variables such as job satisfaction, administrative support, induction programs, and mentoring programs.

**Job Satisfaction**

The level of job satisfaction a teacher experiences can affect whether a teacher stays in special education, or moves to a general education position, or leaves the field of education all together (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007). Many factors directly contribute to job satisfaction (e.g., administrative support, stress, and workload). In a study conducted by Stempien and Loeb (2002), special educators rated themselves lower in overall job satisfaction than their general education counterparts. According to a case study by Billingsley (2007), teachers who left the field cited lack of support from parents and administrators, too much paperwork, limited availability of resources, and large class size as the main items that caused dissatisfaction. In a survey of 57 special educators who stayed in the field, Fish and Stephens (2010) found that a teacher’s ability to serve his or her students leads to high job satisfaction, which increases the likelihood the teacher will stay in the field.

First-year special educators encounter a variety of stressors. A workload that contains students with a variety of different needs, not enough planning time, paperwork, and current policy are several of the factors that provide stress, and in turn lower job satisfaction (Plash & Piotrowski, 2006). Therefore, stress becomes a major factor in job satisfaction (Stempien & Loeb, 2002).

Special educators are often required to complete work outside of what is asked of general education teachers, without additional compensation (Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). This added responsibility is viewed as a hindrance on the teacher’s ability to properly teach their class (Kaff, 2004; White & Mason, 2006). Kaff (2004) used content analysis to examine the results of 341 questionnaires, deducing that instructional delivery is no longer the main role of special education teachers. However, special educators choose the field, and stay in it to teach and provide services for their students (Kaff, 2004). When they are stripped of this role, it
leads to lower job satisfaction, and ultimately leaving the field. Consequently, Wasburn-Moses (2009) surveyed in-service and pre-service special education teachers to determine the role expectations of each. The authors concluded pre-service teachers had an accurate expectation of the problems that they may encounter in their first year. However, the pre-service teachers viewed their future role as one that is in line with current policy, whereas practicing teachers described far different roles. Special educators’ roles can range from those of a classroom teacher to an educational consultant. Special educators also fill a plethora of roles out of necessity including the management of problem behaviors and the administering of social and vocational skills (Condeman & Katsiyannis, 2002). This confusion of roles can lead to early stress and burnout because a teacher entering the field expects a certain role, but may be presented with something vastly different (Thornton et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2009). This additional stress can cause special educators to leave the field. This role confusion can be alleviated by proper support from the building administrator.

**Administrative Support**

According to the research, the lack of support from administrators contributes to special education teachers leaving their jobs (Nance & Calabrese, 2009; Schlichte et al., 2005). A survey by White and Mason (2006) showed teachers and administrators agreed on the importance of administrator support. Furthermore, administrative support is imperative to guide early career special educators through the complex policies in special education. In a qualitative study, Nance and Calabrese (2009) found that special education teachers felt a disconnect with their district administrators, which made it difficult to acquire the necessary support for their classrooms.

Research indicates a lack of administrative support is a cause of teacher attrition in special education (Nance & Calabrese, 2009; Schlichte et al., 2005). There is also literature that demonstrates the role administrative support plays with the retention of teachers (Otto & Arnold, 2005; Santoli, Sachs, Romey, & McClurg, 2008). On reviewing the literature, Leko and Smith (2010) proposed these suggestions for administrators to retain special education teachers: “(a) thinking carefully about school climate, (b) investing in induction, (c) assigning mentors, (d) providing professional development, and (e) assigned reasonable roles and responsibilities.” Administrators can construct an induction program to cover the many supports needed by first-year special educators. The induction program can provide support and guidance allowing the special educator to perform their job while alleviating stress (Leko & Smith, 2010).

**Induction Program**

The implementation of a comprehensive induction program tailored specifically to the needs of first-year special education teachers can have a positive effect on their ability to perform their job and manage their stress level, and intention to stay in special education. T. M. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found the number of teacher induction programs is constantly growing. Current research suggests an induction program containing the necessary elements can help retain special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004a; Wasburn-Moses, 2006). These studies indicate a quality induction program includes assistance with Individualized Education Program (IEP) writing, proper mentoring, and appropriate professional development. Wasburn-Moses (2006) outlined an induction program that contained assistance for young teachers in writing IEPs, mentoring from a general and special education teachers, and professional development based on problems early career teachers encounter. Also, induction programs bridge the gap between preparation programs and the first year of teaching (Leko & Smith, 2010). Billingsley (2004a) stated, “One of the most important actions that schools can take is to provide support to beginning teachers during these vulnerable first years” (p. 371). A comprehensive induction program can eliminate some of the stress and negative feelings that often come with being a first-year special education teacher (Leko & Smith, 2010).

Comprehensive induction programs provide a new teacher with guidance that allows them to grow professionally and personally. Kamman and Long (2010) examined a 3-year induction program at a school district in St. Louis; the rate of special education teacher retention trended upward during the period studied. This induction program utilized special education-specific strategies to induct and support the beginning teachers. The requirements for an induction program are different from state to state. Some states, such as West Virginia, have guidelines that require an induction program for all beginning teachers, whereas other states do not. Bay and Parker-Katz (2009) reported all states at least recommend support for early year teachers, but there is not a format followed by each state or district.

An induction program can help a special educator through the first few years of teaching, when statistically she or he is more likely to leave the field. An induction program for special education teachers must be separate from the overall induction program because of the distinctive problems special education teachers face early in their careers (Thornton et al., 2007). A major component of a successful induction program is a mentoring program. The success of a mentoring program is predicated on a mentor that provides quality advice to the young teacher as well as provides them with someone to open up to (Schlichte et al., 2005).

**Mentoring Programs**

Mentoring is often used as a synonym for induction. However, mentoring is a component of an induction program. Mentoring can take place in a formal or informal setting. Formal mentoring is defined as a predesigned program
with an assigned mentor. Informal mentoring can take place when talking with, or observing another teacher or administrator. Billingsley, Carlson, and Klein (2004) found that first-year teachers preferred and benefited most from informal mentoring. Informal mentoring may provide a first-year educator with more problem-specific advice, rather than a predetermined formal mentoring program (Billingsley et al., 2004). Schlichte et al. (2005) examined this position with a qualitative study of first-year special educators in Midwestern states in which the findings suggested a reoccurring theme of the benefit of relationships with colleagues. Alternatively, White and Mason (2006) argue first-year teachers find a basic, structured, and formal mentoring program beneficial. Mentoring can be delivered in many forms; however, the literature finds that for first-year educators to be effective, they must have someone who can address specific problems and provide them with sound advice (Dempsey, Arthur-Kelly, & Carty, 2009). Often, this someone is their mentor.

There is research that supports the benefits of informal and formal mentoring programs. Although the findings differ, research supports the benefits of having a mentoring program and the positive effect it can have on teacher retention. In addition, there is literature that indicates the mentoring should continue beyond the first year. Research findings indicate that special educators run the greatest risk of leaving in their first 5 years (Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Katstianis et al., 2003). Additional years of mentoring would provide the mentee with guidance beyond their first year and train them to someday be a mentor. Providing novice teachers with the proper mentoring will enhance their job satisfaction and their ability to perform their job, as well as improve the likelihood they will stay in their jobs (Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2004; Thornton et al., 2007).

Special educators find themselves serving multiple roles in their first years of teaching. Because of the variance in their responsibilities, it is beneficial to provide them with a mentor from the special education department, as well as a mentor from the general education department (Wasburn-Moses, 2006). The benefit of having a special education and general education mentor is the wide range of experiences each can draw on to provide the first-year teacher with specific advice.

An emerging trend in mentoring is the value of electronic mentoring, or e-mentoring. S. J. Smith and Israel (2010) define e-mentoring as “the use of computer-mediated communications such as e-mail, discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs, Web conferencing, and growing Internet-based solutions that are changing the way mentors and mentees interact” (p. 30). Some issues require immediate attention, but others can wait until the mentor has a chance to respond. In face-to-face mentoring, the mentor and mentee may only meet at a certain time each week, restricting when the mentee can ask questions. One of the issues with face-to-face mentoring is the availability of mentors onsite. However, e-mentoring allows the mentor to communicate with the mentee from another location and provides a venue for asking questions at any time (Dempsey et al., 2009). Mentoring from a distant location also provides the opportunity to mentor more than one teacher at a time. In a study to determine how effective mentoring is in relieving stress, White and Mason (2006) conclude the location of the mentor does not affect the benefits of the mentoring experience.

To address the important question of qualifications for serving in a mentor role, Sindelar, Heretick, Hirsch, Rorrer, and Dawson (2010) studied the state requirements for becoming a mentor. The most rigorous state was found to be Louisiana, which requires a minimum of 10 years as a full-time teacher, a master’s degree, and at least one 3-hr course in mentoring. Research insists there are vast differences between the problems early career special educators and general educators face (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008; Stempien & Loeb, 2002); however, there are no states that distinguish between the two when assigning mentors (Sindelar et al., 2010). Sindelar and colleagues (2010) deduced a school district must be aware of the policy regarding mentoring programs and be familiar with the current research when designing their program.

To properly review the literature on this topic, special educator attrition and retention must be defined. Billingsley (1993) provided a definition for each possible outcome when examining special educators and their career choices. A plethora of characteristics have been studied to determine the correlation with attrition and retention. Of the demographic variables, age was found to be the only one with a correlation to attrition (Billingsley, 2004b). Although demographics, aside from age, are not good predictors of attrition, job satisfaction, however, has a positive correlation with retention (Fish & Stephens, 2010). A major factor in a special educator’s job satisfaction is administrative support they receive (Nance & Calabrese, 2009; Schlichte et al., 2005). Administrators can provide support by ensuring proper induction, and mentoring programs are in place for beginning special educators. Providing these supports for beginning special educators can improve a beginning teacher’s job satisfaction, and in turn, their probability of remaining in the field.

**Discussion**

The themes outlined in this review represent the trend of focusing on retention to reduce the special education teacher shortage. Teacher attrition was previously covered in the literature. The reasons teachers leave special education jobs (e.g., poor job satisfaction, stress, overworked, lack of support from administration) are represented in the current literature and continue to support findings of previous studies.

The induction programs in the reviewed articles were intense programs that were implemented to retain special education teachers. Schools may use an induction program that all teachers go through on entering the district, but it will...
not be effective unless the intricacies of a first-year special education teacher are considered when designing the program. These findings imply that schools are not properly assimilating their new special education teachers into their districts. Also, they are not receiving the appropriate mentoring or support from their administrators.

Future research in this area should focus on the four areas that researchers have found to help teacher retention: job satisfaction, induction programs, mentoring, and administrative support. Each area has been researched, but it is not exhaustive. There are obvious characteristics that can be scrutinized within each category.

There is a wealth of research on certain aspects of job satisfaction such as stress levels and workloads, but a dearth of research on characteristics such as salaries and supplemental compensation. Researchers should examine whether or not a cross comparison of salaries in school districts affects attrition levels. Also, because of the added responsibilities that cause stress, the relationship of added compensation such as extra professional days and stipends on teacher retention should be researched.

Researchers could investigate different factors of induction programs and their effect on teacher retention. Past research can be taken into account when designing and studying new induction programs. Once there is conclusive research conducted on induction programs, administrators can use the literature to formulate their own program. This cycle of examining the research, choosing the sections that were successful, implementing the program, and studying its effectiveness could help shape induction programs across the country. This could help form future induction programs that will become more readily used in schools aiming to retain special education teachers.

Furthermore, mentoring should also be studied based on the characteristics of the person who is providing the mentoring and whether this mentoring occurs formally or informally. Researchers could also examine the amount of mentoring received and how that correlates with teachers remaining in their jobs or leaving. There is a paucity of research regarding the school counselor providing mentoring; this strategy should be studied further. Many school counselors talk to staff members about their stress levels, and how to deal with the multitude of stressors. Counselors could be surveyed to determine whether they are aware of the additional stressors first-year special educators face.

The area that should receive the most attention in future research is administrative support. There is a lack of research providing specific strategies to help administrators offer more support for first-year special educators. The amount of special education training an administrator has, and how that affects the level of support they provide their teachers, is a study that would provide insights into a potential strategy. Also, future research should focus on the specific definition of support as perceived by administrators and special education teachers. This could show a gap in how each group perceives it and provide a starting point to close the gap.

Researchers exploring this topic should consider the suggestions above. The themes mentioned can be studied individually or in conjunction with other suggestions. Each of the themes is interrelated. Administrative support could be studied with each of the other themes because the administrator would directly design the induction program, assign the mentor, and have an overall effect on job satisfaction.

Future consideration should be given to provide special education teachers with more support and opportunities to grow as an educator. The research in this area shows the impact proper support can have on the retention of teachers in special education. As the shortage continues to grow, school districts and educational agencies must begin to focus more of their attention on the recruitment and retention of special education teachers. This begins by identifying teachers who are more likely to stay in the field and providing them with the proper support and opportunities for growth. The districts and agencies should take heed of the current research calling for more overall support and guidance for new special educators. When more support is provided for these teachers, the amount of special educators remaining in the field will begin to increase, and the gap between the amount of special educators and the number of openings in the field will begin to decline.

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