

Annotated Bibliography:

Recruitment, Induction, and Retention of Teachers in Special Education

Diana Theisinger, M.Ed.

College of William & Mary

**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.**

Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, and Farmer (2011) conducted a mixed-methods study of school administrators (n=373) and special education teachers (n=203). They surveyed and interviewed participants in rural school districts, asking about teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development. The researchers reported that rural districts, in particular, have difficulty filling special education openings. Rural districts also struggle with attrition of special educators. This might be due to a variety of factors, including increased professional isolation of special educators in rural areas and increased challenges related to managing a wide variety of low-incidence disabilities across rural special educators' caseloads.

Administrators in the study conveyed that challenges with filling positions often led them to hire staff members who were not highly qualified for the job. In turn, the special educators' lack of experience or certification for the job led them to experience frustration and a lack of commitment for staying in the job, increasing attrition in these hard-to-fill positions. Teachers in the study reported being unqualified or unable to meet the needs of many of the students in their caseload. Many of the teachers expressed a desire or a plan to leave their current position.

The researchers recommended increased professional development for special educators in rural districts, who may be dealing with myriad disabilities beyond the scope of their formal training. Based on feedback from the teachers in the study, Berry et al. (2011) surmised that additional training and support for teachers would help them feel more successful in their current positions. This, in turn, would increase the likelihood of these teachers staying on the job.

**Brunsting, N. C., Sreckovic, M. A., & Lane, K. L. (2014). Special education teacher burnout: A synthesis of research from 1979 to 2013. *Education and Treatment of Children, 37*(4), 681-712.**

Brunsting, Sreckovic, and Lane (2014) conducted a review of 23 studies related to special educators' burnout—which they define as “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization/cynicism, and (lack of) personal accomplishment” (p. 682). The authors concluded that special educators might be at an especially increased risk of experiencing burnout when compared to the overall population of teachers. Further, Brunsting et al. (2014) warned that teacher burnout affected teacher retention, but also affected teacher effectiveness. Some special educators might not leave the profession, but might essentially “check out,” having an adverse effect on student outcomes.

Brunsting and colleagues (2014) recommended that special educators be aware of their increased risk of burnout so they can confront and manage it early in the process. Further, since many special educators face frequent instances of challenging classroom behaviors, they should focus their continuing education efforts on increasing their repertoire of classroom management strategies. Finally special educators should work to build a network of other teachers (both general and special education) and supportive administrators who can help them confront and combat symptoms of burnout.

The authors also concluded that an essential element in avoiding burnout for special educators relates to the recruitment function of human resources. Administrators should write clear job descriptions and make sure potential candidates are well matched to the skills and duties required in the position. This will help teachers avoid role ambiguity that might otherwise lead to job-related stress.

**Cancio, E. J., Albrecht, S. F., & Johns, B. H. (2014). Combating the attrition of teachers of students with EBD: What can administrators do? *Intervention in School and Clinic, 49(5), 306-312.***

Cancio, Albrecht, and Johns (2014) examined the high rate of attrition among special educators, particularly among those teachers who work with students diagnosed with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD). Of all the categories of special educators, the authors found that both the rate of attrition and the shortage of highly qualified teachers are highest among EBD teachers. Cancio et al. (2014) identified several factors that contributed to teacher retention or resignation (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Factors Associated With Intent to Stay In or Leave the Profession of Teaching Students With Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (EBD)*

<b>Retention Factors</b>	<b>Resignation Factors</b>
Access to curricula	Lack of current, appropriate textbooks and materials
Administrative support for teacher ownership of classroom; Adequate physical space	Lack of awareness/understanding of students w/EBD and their programming needs
Assistance with paperwork	No time for paperwork
Opportunities for training in technology/other PD	No access to resource services
Principal awareness, care, understanding, and availability	Perceived administrative attitude that does not support inclusion of students w/EBD
Support for disciplinary problems	Resistance to acknowledgement of mental health disorders; Inappropriate disciplinary actions
Support system of paraprofessionals and general education colleagues	

*Note.* Adapted from Cancio, Albrecht, and Johns (2014)

The authors concluded that principal support is a key factor in encouraging the retention of special educators, especially those who work with students who have EBD. A strong induction program is essential, and is an area where special educators sometimes are not included. Because isolation is already a risk for special educators, administrators should make extra efforts to include these teachers, especially when recognizing and acknowledging staff achievements. Cancio et al. (2014) also emphasized the importance of providing these teachers with a mentor who has expertise in special education, if not EBD specifically.

**Cowan, J., Goldhaber, D., Hayes, K., & Theobald, R. (2016). Missing elements in the discussion of teacher shortages. *Educational Researcher*, 45(8), 460-462.**

Cowan, Goldhaber, Hayes, and Theobald (2016) provided a counterpoint to the oft-reported fact of nationwide teacher shortages. The authors argued that there is not an overall teacher shortage and, in fact, “only about half of these recent graduates have been hired as public school teachers in a typical year” (p. 460). Instead, Cowan and colleagues (2016) contended that the true shortage exists in specific teaching fields, such as STEM and special education, and in specific school settings, such as rural and high poverty schools. The authors urged policymakers and school districts to target their recruitment efforts at these areas of true shortage.

The authors presented data showing a steady increase in the shortage of special educators, going back decades. However, they juxtaposed this with data showing a relatively steady pool of certified teachers. Cowan and colleagues recommended schools and districts find ways to offer targeted compensation to teachers who are willing to work in hard-to-staff schools or fields. They cited research showing such bonuses might decrease teacher attrition in these settings. The authors warned against broad policy changes, such as loan-forgiveness programs, that would address a fictitious nationwide teacher shortage. Instead, according to Cowan et al. (2016), policymakers should focus such incentives in the specific areas where the shortage is real—namely, special education and rural, high-poverty schools.

**Donne, V., & Lin, F.-Y. (2013). Special education teacher induction: The wiki way. *The Clearing House*, 86, 43-47.**

Donne and Lin (2013) reported findings from a school-university partnership to induct and support new special educators. The university implemented a program using an online wiki to supplement the in-person mentorship new teachers were receiving. A wiki is an online space, similar to a website, that allows any registered user to contribute to or edit content. Users can add text, upload files to share with other users, insert links to useful resources elsewhere on the web, and insert discussion boards or forum posts to address specific learning needs. The authors emphasized that the wiki was used as an additional support measure to complement and enhance teachers' face to face mentorship.

The wiki format allowed many teachers and their mentors to collaborate and contribute to a shared online space, regardless of each teacher's geographic location or other time commitments. There was no single responsible party or "leader" of the online space. Instead, all users contributed what they could and used what they needed from the free online resources. As their learning needs changed, teachers used different resources and requested different types of support.

The authors concluded that online support was helpful for new special educators because of the time constraints new teachers experienced; teachers' preference for outside advice; and the limitations of seeking face-to-face help, especially when geographic isolation is a factor (as is often the case with special educators). Further, they concluded that the use of a wiki to support new teacher induction had also been beneficial for the university sponsoring the research. The university gained insight into the learning needs of new teachers; these insights were then applied to their ongoing evaluation of pre-service teachers' learning needs.

**Fall, A-M. (2010). Recruiting and retaining highly qualified special education teachers for high-poverty districts and schools: Recommendations for educational leaders.**

*Journal of Special Education Leadership, 23(2), 76-83.*

Fall (2010) synthesized findings from three studies that compared special educators in low- and high-poverty districts. In general, higher poverty schools were likely to have higher rates of attrition among special educators. Because hiring new teachers is so expensive, the constant turnover was especially costly for high-poverty districts. Fall (2010) identified a “teacher quality gap” (p. 77) between low- and high-poverty districts.

The author found that special educators in high-poverty districts were twice as likely to lack full certification for their current position and were 12 times more likely to hold emergency certifications than their peers in low-poverty districts. Special educators in high-poverty districts were also more likely to experience a difficult path to certification, attending lower-quality teacher preparation programs and requiring multiple attempts to pass state certification exams.

Fall (2010) recommended a process called “responsive induction” (p. 78), which is tailored to fit the needs of each teacher. She found that teachers in low- and high-poverty schools reported similar levels of support during the induction process; however, teachers in high-poverty schools needed more support than their peers. Fall (2010) advised administrators to coordinate peer support in order to retain special educators. Additionally, administrators should keep extraneous duties and responsibilities to a minimum, especially for teachers who are new to the profession. Providing help with non-specialized tasks, such as paperwork, was seen as a key form of principal support. On a broader level, Fall (2010) advised school districts to carefully allocate their human resources, matching teachers to the jobs that are best aligned with their training and expertise.

**Fish, W. W., & Stephens, T. L. (2010). Special education: A career of choice. *Remedial and Special Education, 31(5), 400-407.***

Fish and Stephens (2010) surveyed 57 elementary and secondary special educators to learn more about the factors that led these teachers to pursue a career in special education as well as the factors that encouraged them to stay in the profession. Participants reported that they had entered the field of special education out of a desire to help others, because they had a family member with a disability, or because they had received special education services themselves. Most were relatively satisfied in their current job and planned to continue in the profession out of a desire to help others. However, they noted that excessive paperwork, lack of administrative support, and isolation from their general education colleagues made their jobs harder and were sources of frustration.

The participants in the study reported that financial hardship and opportunities to pursue non-teaching jobs might lead them to eventually leave the field of special education. Fish and Stephens (2010) asked the participants to make recommendations for school districts to retain high quality special educators. The participants suggested districts might offer financial incentives to recruit special educators; to retain them, districts should provide reimbursement for the many extra hours of paperwork and training special educators undertake. Similarly, districts should make extra efforts to protect the planning time of special educators, since special educators often teach students from multiple grade levels and subject areas. Districts should also include special educators in school wide profession development as a means of combating the isolation many special educators feel. Finally, the authors noted that the rising population of students with disabilities exacerbates the critical shortage of teachers in this field, so efforts to recruit and retain highly qualified special educators are especially important.

**Mason-Williams, L. (2015). Unequal opportunities: A profile of the distribution of special education teachers. *Exceptional Children*, 81(2), 247-262.**

Mason-Williams (2015) conducted an analysis of the 2003-2004 Schools and Staffing Survey. The author examined the distribution of special education teachers from a “resource allocation perspective” (p. 248), which is a lens usually applied to school finance. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the long-term shortage of special educators is equally impacting all schools. Mason-Williams (2015) concluded that schools that are already hard to staff—such as high-poverty or rural schools—are especially hard to staff when it comes to highly qualified special educators.

The author presented research to demonstrate that the shortage of special educators is not a new problem; rather, it has been acknowledged in the literature for at least 30 years. However, in light of emerging research related to the importance of effective teachers in mitigating the effects of factors like SES on student outcomes, Mason-Williams wanted to examine this shortage more closely. She concluded that alternative certification programs, although an imperfect solution, might be the best route for addressing the current critical shortage of highly qualified special educators.

The author concluded that induction programs that include mentorship are key to reducing the attrition of special education teachers. Otherwise, special educators leave the profession at higher rates than general educators. Those who stay, often move toward “easier” schools, with more resources and fewer external challenges. Mason-Williams (2015) suggested that federal, state, and local agencies work together to address both the shortage and the unequal distribution of teachers, to ensure all students have equitable opportunities for success.

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

Prather-Jones (2011) conducted a qualitative study of 13 special educators. The participants had at least 7 years of experience working with students who had emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD). Prather-Jones (2011) was interested in the factors that led to these teachers staying in their positions. Nationwide, teachers of students with EBD have the highest rate of attrition of any group of teachers. This has led to school districts filling openings with substitute or uncertified teachers, or leaving the positions unfilled. Prather-Jones (2011) argued that retention of those teachers who are currently in the field is essential.

Participants reported that administrative and collegial support was critical to their decision to stay in the field. Specifically, three types of administrative support were important:

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 made 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, pp. 4-5)

Teachers reported feeling supported by principals when the principal asked for advice about how to handle discipline issues related to students with EBD. The participants also reported feeling appreciated when principals gave verbal praise and acknowledgement for the challenges of their positions. Prather-Jones (2011) encouraged administrators to provide proactive support to special educators, especially those who work with students who have EBD, and look for ways to make their jobs easier. Administrators should also prioritize establishing a collaborative climate so that general educators work alongside special educators in the best interest of students.

**Scott, L. A. (2016). Where are all the Black male special education teachers? *Perspectives on Urban Education*, 13(1), 42-48.**

Scott (2016) reviewed the literature related to the chronic, nationwide shortage of special educators and wrote a commentary focusing specifically on the shortage of Black male special educators. He found that the disproportionately high number of Black male students in special education is contrasted with the disproportionately low number of Black male teachers in special education. This problem is worse in urban areas. Scott (2016) drew connections between the lack of positive Black male role models in special education with the increasingly poor outcomes for Black male students in special education—high dropout rates, the school to prison pipeline, and high rates of unemployment as adults.

Scott (2016) made several recommendations for universities, policymakers, and school districts to address this problem. First, universities should focus on recruiting Black male students to pursue teaching, especially in the field of special education. Universities should also partner with school districts to support and mentor new special educators, in efforts to retain them in the profession. Finally, universities and policymakers should work together to develop distance-learning programs that offer alternative routes to certification, making the field of special education more accessible to those interested in teaching. Similarly, policymakers should examine current certification requirements and look for alternatives that could fast-track current preservice teachers. School districts should increase pay for special educators commensurate with their increased job responsibilities (e.g., managing a caseload; working in a high-stress position). Scott (2016) concluded that the current shortage of positive Black male role models in schools, and particularly in special education, is a societal problem that universities, policymakers and school districts need to work together to solve.