

***Should I Stay or Should I Go?***  
***Revisiting Influencing Factors of SPED Teacher Attrition & Retention***  
***A Review of the Literature***

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***Abstract***

Evidence continually reports that special education (SPED) teachers stay in the field three-to-five academic school years before leaving the profession. A systematic review of historical-to-current literature revealed that personal, employment, and external factors were the three most prevalent variables that influenced attrition and retention (A&R) rates of SPED teachers. Although A&R has significant implications for student learning outcomes, the focus of this article is on analyzing these casual factors in an attempt to revisit and revitalize this important issue.

***Revisiting Influencing Factors of SPED Teacher Attrition & Retention***

It is difficult to dispute that teachers are vital to increasing the learning outcomes of *all* students (see Berry, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; NCLB, 2002; Race to the Top, 2008; Rebell & Hunter, 2004; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). From this perspective the ability for school administrators to hire and--more importantly--retain highly qualified teachers is paramount (Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2011). Excellent teachers have the capacity to provide consistency within their learning environment while simultaneously imparting knowledge in order to meet the unique academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students with and without disabilities (Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2007; Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2010).

Over the last decade, the U.S. educational system has been grappling with abysmal attrition and retention (A&R) rates of special education (SPED) teachers (Billingsley, 2004a; Theoharis, 2008). Unfortunately this conundrum continues to exacerbate the omnipresent achievement gap (Fitzpatrick, 2010) and increases the financial burden to already *cash strapped* school districts (Billingsley, 2004b). On the forefront of this pervasive issue are institutions of higher education (IHE) which have encountered the difficult task of producing a highly qualified, diverse, and committed teaching force (Billingsley, 2002; McLeskey, Tyler, & Saunders, 2002). Moreover, preparing and retaining effective teachers has been a longstanding problem (Billingsley, 2004a) and has wide reaching implications regarding U.S. students viability in a globalized society (Fitzpatrick, 2010).

Sadly the literature is replete with appalling data specifically related to the multidirectional relationship between the critical shortage of SPED teachers and significant challenges for communities, schools, and families (Luekens et al., 2004). Thus, the purpose of this article serves as a review of historical-to-current literature (1980-2012) specifically related to the dire state of A&R among SPED teachers. Please note the intention was not to differentiate between disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities and Autism), rather provides as an analysis identifying three causal issues that intensify A&R among SPED teachers including personal, employment, and external factors. Additionally given the complexity of these factors, the authors are opting not to provide viable solutions. For potential solutions please see Theoharis (2008). The three causal issues are discussed in the sections below.

### ***Demographic & Personal Information***

Numerous studies have examined the impact of demographic and personal factors on SPED teacher A&R rates (see, Boe et al., 1997; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten et al., 2001; Miller et al., 1999; Morvant et al., 1995; Singer, 1992; Singh & Billingsley, 1996). Research related to personal factors were divided into three main categories (a) demographic information (e.g., age, gender, race), (b) academic aptitude (e.g., qualifications and degrees earned), and (c) life experiences (e.g., finances and perceived opportunities). Based on a review of the literature, these factors were the most prolific variables pertaining to SPED teacher A&R. The following is a truncated synopsis of each category.

*Age.* A considerable amount of research has been devoted to the relationships between age and A&R (see, Boe, et al., 1997; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Morvant et al., 1995; Singer, 1992). Additionally, age is the only demographic variable that has been consistently linked to this phenomenon among SPED teachers (Billingsley, 2004b). It is evident that younger SPED teachers are more likely to leave or express an interest in leaving the profession compared to their veteran colleagues (Boe, et al., 1997; Cross & Billingsley).

*Gender.* Billingsley (2004b) suggested that a relationship between gender and attrition exists. However, unlike age, there has been limited research pertaining to the relationship between gender and A&R among SPED teachers (Elitharp, 2005; Theoharis, 2008). Moreover what has been analyzed between this relationship have produced mixed findings (see, Boe, et al., 1997; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Miller et al., 1999; Morvant et al., 1995; Singer, 1992). For example, several studies show attrition rates are higher for women compared to men (Gonzalez, 1993; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982; Singer, 1992). Conversely, almost an equal number of studies showed no significant difference between genders (Boe, et al., 1997; Cross & Billingsley; Singh & Billingsley, 1996).

*Race.* Although 38% of students receiving SPED services in U.S. public schools are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD), only 14% of SPED teachers are from historically underrepresented groups (Kozleski, Mainzer, Deshler, Coleman, &

Rodriguez-Walling, 2000; Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippin, 2004). Further, Riley (1998) reported that more than 40% of schools in the U.S. did not have any teachers from CLD backgrounds. This trend continues to be prevalent as research indicated the number of minority SPED teachers has continued to decline (Olson, 2000; Theoharis, 2008).

*Qualifications.* Teacher qualifications and A&R rates have received little attention in SPED literature (Billingsley, 2004b; Theoharis, 2008). Moreover, despite the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002), it has been challenging for researchers to agree on the meaning or a definition of teacher quality (Blanton et al., 2002; Billingsley, 2004b). The lack of a common understanding of the term has made selecting an instrument to measure teacher quality not only difficult but controversial (Billingsley, 2004b). For example, variables including (a) nature of practicum or field experiences, (b) student teaching, or (c) teacher efficacy that could provide information related to teacher quality and the relationship of these characteristics to SPED teacher A&R have rarely been addressed by researchers or in the literature (Billingsley, 2004b).

*Degrees Earned.* In the late eighties-to-early nineties there was a generous amount of evidence illustrating how the level of education influenced the A&R rates of SPED teachers (Bruton, 2001). Unfortunately no contemporary articles (e.g., 2005-present) were found related to this factor (Theoharis, 2008). However, the majority of research that was reviewed revealed a relationship existed between the level of education and A&R of SPED teachers. This variable appeared to influence whether or not a SPED teacher would remain in their position (Banks & Necco, 1987; Bogenschild et al., 1988; Lauritzen, 1988; Parshall, 1990; Seery, 1990). For example, Banks and Necco reported that SPED teachers with a graduate degree taught three years longer than teachers with only an undergraduate degree. Similarly Bogenschild et al., Lauritzen's (1988), and Parshall's (1990) reported analogous findings.

*Personal Finances & Perceived Opportunities.* Personal factors, such as finances and perceived opportunities, may have an effect on whether or not SPED teachers stay in the profession (Billingsley, 2004b). Similar to qualifications, there was a limited number of historical and contemporary research related to this factor (Theoharis, 2008). Billingsley and Cross (1992) found no differences between individuals who provided the main source of income for their family and those who did not regarding their intent to stay or leave SPED. In contrast to Billingsley and Cross's findings, Westling and Whitten (1996) suggested that SPED teachers, who served as their family's primary source of income, were more likely to remain in the field compared to those who were not.

This section provided a summation of the primary demographic factors influencing SPED teachers decision to either stay or leave the profession. Although it is fairly obvious additional attention is required to update outdated literature, the relevancy of demographic factors and how they related to A&R was--at one point and time--investigated thoroughly. Next, is an exploration into how employment factors negatively influences A&R.

### ***Employment Factors***

Regardless of profession, job frustrations are typically universal. Specifically in the field of SPED, Theoharis (2008) identified nine employment factors that adversely impacted teacher A&R. However, for the purpose of this article the authors regrouped Theoharis (2008) findings and focused on salary, school culture and climate, and role ambiguity. Below is an overview of each causal factor.

*Salary.* Arguably, few teachers enter the profession with the hopes of getting rich. However, based on national salary averages teachers continually fall below other professionals with similar degrees. For example, the average salary for a novice teacher (e.g., <5 years) with a bachelor's degree was \$32,000 whereas a veteran teacher (e.g., >5 years) with a masters degree ranged from \$51,000-to-\$69,000. Although the salary range appears attractive it pales in comparison when considering the average salary of computer programmers with an associate degree and eight years of experience was \$96,000.

*Culture and Climate.* The culture and climate of schools is one of the broadest variables in SPED A&R (Billingsley, 2004b; Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2011). According to Billingsley et al. (2004) and Miller et al. (1999) SPED teachers who view school culture and climate positively are more likely to continue teaching compared to teachers with negative perceptions of their school's culture.

*Role Ambiguity.* A strong relationship exists between the role of the teacher and their decision to leave the profession (see Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten et al., 2001; Morvant et al., 1995). Role ambiguity has many facets including (a) job or position inconsistencies, (b) conflicts, (c) caseloads, (d) workload manageability, and (d) dissonance (Billingsley, 2004a). These challenges have perpetuated role ambiguity which negatively impacts both veteran and novice teachers (Billingsley, 2004a).

This section summarized three employment factors which significantly impacted teacher's decisions whether to stay or leave the profession. Next, the authors address three external factors.

### ***External Factors***

According to Theoharis (2008) SPED A&R is influenced by forces outside the control of the employing school district. The literature review revealed that few studies have been conducted to address the variables such as familial and friend, societal, and institutional perspectives (Billingsley, 1993). Nevertheless below is a summation of findings related to these three factors.

*Family & Friend Perspective.* Although heartfelt sentiments such as *family is all* (Schnauz & MacLaren, 2010) and *friends are friends forever* (Smith & Smith, 1989, Track 9) there was only one study discovered related to how perspectives of family and friends impacted A&R among SPED teachers (Theoharis, 2008). Tye and O'Brien (2002)

discovered that family and friend's perspective had major implications for how SPED teachers viewed and valued their position. For example, many teachers reported a desire for their family, friends, and peers to understand and accept the significance of their career choice. In essence, Theoharis (2008) findings suggested that the less accepting, the more apt teachers were to leave the profession.

*Societal Perspective.* In an era of social connectivity, the need for societal relevance (e.g. acceptance) is vital for both novice and veteran teachers (Fitzpatrick, 2010). For example, Spears, Gould, and Lee (2000) argued that a random sampling of most U.S. schools would reveal teachers are not given the same status as other professionals. Similarly Inman and Marlow (2004) reported that teachers indicated they were not given the authority and prestige they believed they earned. This is clearly evident when most teachers typically have to (a) schedule all breaks; (b) sign in and out of the workplace; (c) work specifically within school hours (e.g., limited access to the building on weekends); and (d) take-on copious responsibilities including bus, playground, hall, and lunchroom duties. Each of these components negatively influences a SPED teacher's decision to either stay or leave the field.

*Institutional Perspective:* Institutional perspective consisted of IHE, educational agencies, and teacher unions (Theoharis, 2008). Theoretically the goals of these institutions are to increase retention and decrease attrition. Traditionally, once students accepted a teaching position the role and responsibility of the college or university ceased (Weasmer & Woods, 1996). However, within the past five-to-ten years several postsecondary institutions have adopted school based mentorship programs in order to support SPED inductees (Boyer, 2005; Whitaker & Hiller, 1996). Although most educational agencies and teacher unions strive for equity, sadly, despite the positive intentions, institutional initiatives often created significant obstacles, challenges and disincentives, through increased mandates, with minimal-to-no support to meet escalating demands (Theoharis, 2008).

### ***Conclusion***

The specific intent of this article was to provide a broad-brush overview of findings rather than an in-depth analysis or differentiate between disabilities. Nevertheless it is apparent each of the aforementioned factors is complex (Theoharis, 2008) and often leaves school districts caught in a continuous cycle of recruitment and replacement (Thornton et al., 2007). From a historical perspective, there was a plethora of research related to SPED teacher A&R. Unfortunately as demonstrated throughout this article, the vast majority of relevant research is archaic, especially when considering new educational policies and legislative mandates hold *all* teachers accountable for their student's learning outcomes (Abedi, 2004; Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2007).

Although A&R has appeared to fall off the proverbial research radar, each factor has broad reaching implications for the U.S. educational system. Moreover, given that this article did not provided viable solutions to this multifaceted problem (see Theoharis, 2008), the authors would be remiss to forgo a subtle clarion call to action. Policy makers,

IHEs, and administrators need to be cognizant of how each factor impacts A&R rates among SPED teachers. In essence, it does not take an Einstein to conceptualize how a revolving door hinders student achievement, learning, and overall school climate and culture. Proactively addressing these issues should help alleviate SPED teachers from constantly debating *should I stay or should I go*.

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