

**RED TAPE AND GREEN TEACHERS:  
THE IMPACT OF PAPERWORK ONNOVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS**

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*Eighteen novice special education teachers were interviewed regarding their opinions, experiences, and advice regarding professional paperwork such as IEPs, behavior plans, and annual goals. A qualitative analysis of the responses suggests three main findings: (1.) Participants had a negative opinion of paperwork based on its lengthiness and perceived irrelevancy to instruction. (2.) Participants cited mentors, peers, and practice, as the best ways to learn about paperwork. (3.) Recommended paperwork advice for new teachers were to understand expectation, ask for help, and get organized. Implications and recommendations are discussed.*

*Supporting and Retaining Novice Special Education Teachers*

The first five years of a special education teacher's (SET) career have been described as particularly fragile. Studies have shown anywhere from one-third to one-half of beginning teachers leave the profession during this time (Singer, 1993; Coleman, 2000; Menlove, Garnes, & Salzberg, 2004). The research also suggests that the attrition problem is more a matter of retention than of recruitment (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell & Smith, 1992; McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin, 2004). It has been compared to continuously filling a water bucket with a large hole in its bottom.

This analogy may be oversimplified. It might be more accurate to describe a bucket with dozens of tiny leaks in it, since special educators leave the field for many different reasons (e.g., low pay, poor working conditions, transfers to general education).

*Role Conflict and Attrition.*

One largely unexplored obstacle to remaining in the field has been role conflict. Singh and Billingsley (2004) defined role conflict as *a large discrepancy between the type of tasks that workers expect to do and those in which they regularly engage* (p. 40). SETs may experience role conflict when they believe that their supervisors place a higher priority on the bureaucratic demands of their job (i.e., professional paperwork), compared to teaching.

Role conflict can lead to feelings of frustration, isolation, and despair (Singh & Billingsley, 2004). Therefore, it is important to examine to what degree a perceived paperwork burden can negatively affect the morale of SETs. The following section describes some of these challenges.

*Challenges of Special Education Paperwork*

Professional paperwork is defined as *the documents, reports, brochures, and the like that are filled out, distributed, or submitted by school personnel or parents to meet procedural requirements of federal, state, or local special education law or regulations* (Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, n.d., p. 7). Examples include individual education plans (IEPs), behavioral plans, manifestation determination review materials, annual goals and objectives, and student re-evaluation forms.

The following research suggests that SETs often view professional paperwork in a negative light. Two of their most common complaints are that it is time consuming and that it has limited perceived value.

*Time consuming.* Paperwork can be an extremely time consuming and labor intensive activity. It is estimated that the average special education teacher spends five hours per week on paperwork (Suran &

Giangreco, 2009). Educators spend more time on completing paperwork than grading papers, communicating with parents, sharing expertise with colleagues, supervising paraprofessionals, and attending IEP meetings combined. (Carlson, Chen, Schroll, & Klein, 2003).

*Limited perceived value.* Paperwork can present additional challenges if it is not seen to be of significant value. SETs have described it as *wasteful, repetitive and redundant* with limited direct impact on daily instruction (Kirlin et al., 2004). Paperwork can be especially problematic if it is perceived as a legal formality, rather than a useful working document. For example, Dudley-Marling (1985) found that less than half of special education teachers surveyed referred to IEPs more than once a month and less than one-fourth believed it helped prepare for daily instruction.

Problems with paperwork can negatively impact the productivity and motivation of SETs. The following section highlights past studies that uncovered a negative relationship between paperwork and teacher morale.

#### *Effects of Paperwork on Special Education Teacher Morale*

Morale is defined as *The capacity of an individual to maintain belief in an institution or goal.* (Kirlin et al., 2004, p. 82). As it relates to the SET, morale can be divided into two subsections: a.) job stress/burnout, b.) job satisfaction/commitment to the profession.

*Paperwork impact on job stress and burnout.* Olson & Matuskey (1982) investigated six professional sources of stress for teachers of students with learning disabilities. Survey respondents cited *excessive paperwork* as the number one stress factor. Seventy-eight percent of respondents replied that this was a source of tension at their job.

In a 2001 study, Emhich surveyed 300 secondary teachers of students with learning disabilities. *Perceived workload* (defined as paperwork, meetings, conferences and other non-teaching activities) was one of the highest predictors of job stress and burnout.

*Paperwork impact on job satisfaction and commitment to the profession.* The paperwork burden has also cited as having a negative impact on job satisfaction and commitment to the profession for some special educators. For example, a national survey of teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing was conducted to determine which variables most negatively affected job satisfaction.

It was discovered that the items *amount of paperwork required* and *time needed for non-teaching duties* were among the respondents' highest perceived threats to job satisfaction (Luckner & Hanks, 2003).

Similarly, Cross & Billingsley (1994) surveyed SETs regarding factors that negatively influence job satisfaction. Prompts associated with non-teaching responsibilities proved to be the most problematic for the sample.

In a survey of 96 emotional support teachers, over one-fourth of respondents felt that *completing required paperwork* was the most difficult aspect of their job. Furthermore, the prompt *inadequate time for paperwork* was cited as one of the most frequently mentioned reasons why teachers left the profession (George, George, Gersten, and Grosenick, 1995).

#### *Current Study*

Previous research has suggested that professional paperwork can be problematic for SETs. Negative consequences such as job stress, job dissatisfaction, and a desire to leave the field have all been documented. The current study examines if and how these problems are intensified for novices.

#### *Participants*

The current study involved semi-structured telephone interviews with 18 novice SETs. For the purpose of this study, a novice is defined as a teacher with five or less years experience. Participants were selected at random with assistance from Market Data Retrieval, an American market research firm focused specifically on the education profession.

The study called for a total of 20 novice teachers from throughout the United States; however a series of prior commitments prevented two individuals from participating. Eighteen interviews were deemed an acceptable number by the researcher, as it was a substantial enough amount to gain a well-rounded selection of experiences and opinions, yet manageable in regards to the coding and analytic demands of qualitative research.

Key demographics reported among the sample included residency in twelve states, teaching students with nine distinct IDEA-recognized disabilities, and teaching in schools that run the gamut from pre-school to vocational transitions services.

Other demographics mirrored those reported elsewhere in the literature, such as a majority of respondents being both white and female (Billingsley, 2002; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Griffin et al., 2009).

The mean age of the respondents was 33 years old. This was older than the mean participant in the aforementioned studies, but can be accounted for by the fact that five of the participants were embarking on their second career. The mean number of years experience for the sample was 2.5. A select rundown of key demographics is listed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Select Respondent Demographic Information**

Name	Age	Years Experience	Primary Type of Instruction
Amy	22	1	Itinerant
Angela	24	1	Itinerant
April	24	1	Itinerant
David	50	2	Self-contained
Doreen	48	2	Itinerant
Jeanette	47	3	Co-teach
Kathie	42	2	Self-contained
Kerri	26	3	Self-contained
Krissy	31	4	Self-contained
Laura	29	5	Self contained
Linda C.	24	2	Itinerant
Linda M.	24	2	Self-contained
Melinda	37	2	Self-contained
Paul	25	3	Co-teach
Rosalee	33	2	Itinerant
Ryan	29	5	Co-teach
Shellie	52	3	Co-teach
Tiffany	25	2	Self-contained

### Research Questions

The study had three main research questions:

1. To what degree do novice special education teacher value professional paperwork?
2. How do novice special education teachers best learn to successfully complete professional paperwork?

3. What paperwork management advice do novice special educators have for those planning to enter the field?

During the interview process, respondents were asked a series of open ended prompts pertaining to each of the three research question. Follow up questions and requests for clarification and examples were also included. Table two shows sample follow-up prompts associated with each of the main three questions.

**Table 2. Interview Question Clusters and Sample Prompts**

Research Question Cluster	Example Prompts
1. Value of paperwork	What is the first thing that comes to mind when I say <i>special education paperwork</i> ?  Give a specific experience that has shaped your opinion about paperwork.
2. Learn about paperwork	What one factor has been most valuable in preparing you for your paperwork duties?  To what degree have your college classes prepared you for your paperwork responsibilities?
3. Advice about paperwork	What one piece of paperwork advice do you wish you knew earlier?  What paperwork advice would you give to a pre-service special education teacher?

#### *Research Procedures*

Respondents were interviewed for approximately 45 minutes each. Each telephone conversation was recorded with permission from the individual. Recordings were later converted into written transcripts.

Transcripts were evaluated and assessed using an issues-focus analysis (Weiss, 1994). First, the data were coded according to categories and concepts that were later determined. Coded material was then sorted, according to similar themes and recurring elements. Lastly, data were integrated into a cohesive narrative form.

Trustworthiness of the data was accomplished in two ways. First, another scholar familiar with the needs of beginning special educators independently read and reviewed all transcripts for emergent themes. Findings between researchers were compared and revised accordingly.

Secondly, respondents were later contacted to review their attributed quotes within the study and relevant themes associated with each quote. Individuals had an opportunity to provide clarification or correction as needed.

#### *Findings*

##### *Opinions on Paperwork Value*

The first research question was, *To what degree do novice special education teachers value professional paperwork?* The responses from participants were mixed. Although a few teachers acknowledged paperwork as a tool to help plan, document, and assess, many others described it as redundant, lengthy, and overwhelming.

The following section describes participants' feelings regarding their paperwork responsibilities, and common reasons for these feelings.

*First impressions.* Participants were asked to share the first thing that came to their mind when it came to paperwork. Most of these first impressions were negative in tone. Comments included, *way too much, overwhelming, always changing, pain in the neck, and ridiculous.* Only one teacher, Doreen, shared an

impression that was strictly positive. She stated that she *loved it*. Her follow up response was that *it was the only way to really get to know the kids*.

*Justification of opinions.* The transcripts revealed three main themes as to why many respondents had a negative attitude when it comes to paperwork. The three themes were: (a.) challenges of multi-tasking, (b.) ambiguity, and (c.) time management problems.

*Challenges of multi-tasking.* Several respondents shared anecdotes to illustrate the numerous demands placed upon a new teacher. For example, David shared his challenges with multi-tasking:

It is impossible to know your students, master their files, go to all the meetings, and to teach. So many new teachers have no clue how to do it correctly. When the staff is so inexperienced, it is primarily the student whom suffers most.

He goes on to detail the additional bureaucracy associated with being an emotional support instructor: Not only do we have to do academic goals and accommodations, but there are also all of the behavior plans and checklists and manifestation meetings that we must attend on top of that.

Amy expressed her difficulty with multi-tasking in trying to balance her responsibilities as an IEP team leader with those of a classroom teacher:

I'd often have a parent in a meeting and feel as if I had to hurry them through because the bell was about to ring. They wanted to talk about their child and I would feel bad because I was too focused on getting to class. My mind was totally scattered during those occasions.

*Ambiguity.* A second common theme that emerged was a perceived lack of clarity in both paperwork purpose and procedure. Ryan explained how he felt that the ambiguity of the paperwork presented a greater problem than its length:

I've learned by trial and error, and sadly, some of those errors have been a real pain to fix. It's not so much the amount of paperwork, as it is the uncertainty of what I should be using, signing, and when.

Melinda shared that her supervisors put more value on what was written on paper, as opposed to what was taught in class. She said:

It's all for show. From my experiences, it doesn't matter a lick what goes on in the classroom, but rather what goes down on paper. Even when you do want to use an IEP to learn about your students, they are either incomplete or too vague to be of any use.

*Time management problems.* Time management problems and scheduling complexities were a third area described negativity regarding paperwork. For example, Angela shared, *All our IEPs were due after spring break...things got crazy at the end of the year*.

Technology was not generally viewed as a IEP time saver to participants. As David explained, *Although we use computer software, I don't think it helps much. The rules keep changing and we have to be retrained on how to fill them in*.

Linda C. shared concerns about problems associated with paperwork software. She said, *Both a curse and blessing this year is that we were assigned laptops so that we could access the IEP program from home. I find myself resorting to taking my paperwork home. It helps me at school; it doesn't help my family or marriage*.

#### *Paperwork Completion Training*

The second research question was, *How do novice special education teachers best learn to successfully complete professional paperwork?* Participants were generally negative in regards to the extent of preparation their pre-service programs provided them about paperwork. It was also revealed that for many, the most beneficial training took place on the job. Others felt that training and experiences in a previous career best helped prepare them for special education red tape.

*Pre-service training.* A few participants were able to cite specific pre-service classes or experiences designed to help them understand the purpose and function of professional paperwork. For example, Amy stated, *I had two classes in college about writing IEPs. The instructors were very realistic and honest about the volume of paperwork that special educators have to complete*

It was much more common for an educator to state that their pre-service exposure to paperwork completion was lacking or non-existent. Kathie said, *My college training, however, was not very thorough. We had probably one or two examples to look at. It wasn't very in-depth.* Similarly, Ryan shared, *Honestly, my college courses did not help at all. Throughout my entire program, I only had to write one IEP for class. It wasn't helpful.*

*On the job training.* The majority of respondents felt that on the job training was the best source of preparation. There was a general consensus that new teachers needed to *roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty* in order to truly understand how to successfully complete professional paperwork. Responses that support this notion included, *I think the best training is actually doing the IEPs and The majority of experience I have had with paperwork has been on the job training.*

Participants suggest that with experience, teachers will gain confidence in their paperwork writing abilities, and reduce the amount of time needed for completion.

As Rosalee stated:

The only thing that has helped me with the IEPs is practice. The more I do, the better (and quicker) I get. My first year it took me two or three hours to do an IEP. Now, I can probably do four of them in that time period.

*Colleagues and mentors.* A commonly discussed asset for these beginning teachers were colleagues and mentors who answered questions and provided clarification when needed. As Angela explained, *On the job training was just about the only thing that helped me learn paperwork. We have a small school, so I got help from colleagues because we feel as if we are in this together.*

Participants also had positive experiences regarding their interactions with mentor teachers. Ryan shared, *My mentor teacher has been extremely helpful to me. She is very knowledgeable and very organized.*

*Administrators and supervisors.* Administrator and supervisors were generally not highly valued in regards to the amount of paperwork support and training given to novice teachers. Administrators were often perceived as *clueless*, while special education supervisors were described as *unrealistic in their expectations*. April said:

I had a supervisor who never taught. I have no respect for her. She was fixated on the details of my paperwork that we were required to submit every two weeks. She would hand them back and make me revise them for the most ridiculous reasons. All the while, I didn't have time to adequately prepare for classes because I was spending all my time addressing her nitpicking concerns.

#### *Advice for New Teachers*

The third research question was, *What paperwork management advice do novice special educators have for those planning to enter the field?* Many participants were willing to share their personal practices and outlook that they feel had helped them become more successful with the bureaucratic responsibilities of their profession. Three pieces of advice emerged from the interviews, (a.) understand expectations, (b.) ask for help, and (c.) get organized.

*Understand expectations.* The most prevalent piece of advice, contributed by eight of the 18 participants was to encourage pre-service special education teachers to fully understand the extent of the paperwork demands associated with their jobs. Quotes such as, *I would tell them to make sure they understood everything that was expected of them, and that they were clear about expectations* underscores the importance of familiarizing beginning teachers with their professional responsibilities beyond the classroom.

Some participants voiced this notion in a relatively optimistic manner, *Learn to love it! It can be overwhelming at times, but it is definitively worth it.* Others took a more pessimistic tone. Paul stated:



They ought to know how much they will be involved in paperwork, and how little it will really matter. It's garbage. It's all for show. From my experience, it doesn't matter what goes on in the classroom, but rather what goes down on paper.

*Ask for help.* A recurring piece of advice from respondents was to encourage new teachers to ask colleagues and supervisors about paperwork and how to complete it.. As Tiffany explained, *Don't be afraid to ask questions. Don't be afraid to look bad. For every one question you ask, there are probably five other people who are thinking the same thing.*

Angela illustrated the importance of asking for help via a personal anecdote that happened to her during her first year. She explained that in order to be hired as a Spanish teacher, she had to also teach special education part time. A lack of any formal training or experience lead to the following situation.

It was about March of my first year, when another teacher asked if she could borrow the IEP for one of my students. I replied, *What's an IEP?* Nobody told me ahead of time what they were or how to do them. At this point, a colleague sat down with me and we knocked out twenty of them in a week. I am not a dumb person, so it didn't take long once I figured out what I was supposed to be doing.

*Get organized.* A common belief expressed was that professional paperwork can be more easily managed with strong organizational skills. Specific examples of way to get organized were to encourage new teachers to *use binders, color code things, and save a template of IEPs that work for you.*

Other respondents felt that organization extended beyond simple tips and tricks. They felt that organization was an important personality trait that special education teachers needed to be successful. Two quotes that highlight this concept are, *I think I am very good at paperwork because I am anal retentive* and, *I think being an organized person is the best thing that helps me prepare for the bureaucratic duties of being a special ed teacher.*

#### *Limitations, Discussion and Suggestions*

A limitation of this study is its dependence on the self-reported data of participants. Future studies could address this limitation through the addition of some objective quantitative measurements such as analysis of the number of IEPs written or amount of time spent on paperwork per week. A second limitation of the study is that each participant was only interviewed once. Longitudinal studies may allow researchers to determine if the opinions and practices regarding paperwork change for novice teachers over the course of a school year, or even over the course of their careers.

The findings of this study reinforce prior research that found special education paperwork to be a stressful and tedious task. Participants stated that paperwork is often viewed negatively, and that it is not consistently used as a tool to enhance the academic growth of their students.

Regardless of national origin, or the amount of bureaucracy associated with being a SET, the results of this study suggests that educators are happier and more satisfied when they regularly are engaged in tasks directly associated with helping children learn. These findings align with the belief that role conflict presents a significant problem for SETs. It is suggested that future studies investigate if role conflict leads to attrition for novice special educators.

A prominent suggestion brought up repeatedly by participants is the need for ongoing help and support. It is suggested that administrators, teacher-educators, and other stakeholders invest in multiple ways of providing paperwork assistance to novice teachers. The utilization of mentors, in-service trainings, and formal induction programs all have the potential to increase teacher confidence and competence when it comes to paperwork. This is especially true when these techniques are used in tandem, rather than in isolation.

A second suggestion, based on the interviews, is for teacher-educators and administrators to better explain the value of paperwork. IEPs should be discussed and treated as a valuable tool in planning, instruction, and assessment, rather than some sort of necessary evil.

Special education paperwork is not going to go away in the near future. In fact, due to increased accountability and societal litigiousness, the amount may even increase. Therefore, it is critical that the

field invests in on-going training, guidance, and communication to best support our new teachers, and, ultimately to provide our students with the quality education that they deserve.

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