

Relationships More Important than Money? A Study of What Keeps Teachers Going When the Going Get Tough.

Debi Katkus

Illinois State University

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare two large school districts to national studies on what teachers believe is good and bad about their jobs and what affects a decision to stay at or leave a position. The study consisted of five interviews of special education teachers in varying positions, backgrounds, and years of experience. Data was collected using a series of open-ended questions and then compared to researched literature. Although several common themes were found, there were several significant differences. Implications for findings were discussed. It was suggested that fostering positive relationships among teachers in a district can have a significant affect on teacher retention.

Introduction

When beginning any new job, there is a period of adjustment until a person feels comfortable. With a new teaching job this period of adjustment can last from weeks to years depending on many factors. These same factors may be the primary reasons a person stays or leaves the teaching profession. Attrition in the teaching profession has long been a problem. It is expensive for school districts to hire new teachers and disruptive to students to adjust to changing teachers (Theobald & Michael, 2001). Many studies have been conducted to find the statistics on teacher turnover as well as the reasons behind it. While the following literature may cover all teaching areas, the main focus is on Special Education teachers.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to compare the positive and negative aspects of teaching and the reasons for leaving those jobs in two Midwest districts with other studies throughout the United States.

Literature Review

Special Education versus General Education

While teacher attrition is a general concern, special education teachers statistically have more turnover than general education teachers (Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002). There is a higher need for special education teachers but a lower number of teachers available. More special education teachers switch to general education than the opposite (23% vs.

17%) (Boe, et al, 1998). Special education teachers are more likely to transfer districts. Surveys show that special education teachers had a much lower job satisfaction than general education teachers do (Stempien & Loeb, 2002).

Several reasons were given for this difference in turnover rates and job satisfaction. One reason was that many special education teachers feel less prepared for the diverse student population they are responsible for (Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002). They feel that their undergraduate education did not fully prepare them for all the aspects of their job (Kilgore, et al., 2003). Also beginning teachers are often given the most challenging teaching assignments, although they have not yet acquired the multiple strategies and skills needed for those difficult positions (Otto & Arnold, 2005). As better positions open up, they switch buildings or districts. The fact that special education teachers are in greater demand than general education teachers allows for the opportunity to move. Lastly, special education teachers often feel isolated, especially self-contained teachers. Self-contained teachers were the most at risk for leaving the field (Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002). They cite lack of peer interaction and administrative support adds to the already high stress of their jobs.

In the Beginning

Stress factors for all beginning teachers are similar. Unfamiliarity with the building and staff, curriculum, and the expectations all can lead to high levels of stress for new teachers (Billingsly, 2004). Special educators, like general educators, must engage in educational planning, understanding the curriculum, and becoming familiar with school routines, but they also have numerous additional responsibilities such as managing paperwork, making accommodations, developing and monitoring IEPs, and collaborating with various service personnel and teachers (Billingsly & Tomchin, 1992; Boyer & Gillespie, 2000; Kilgore & Griffin, 1998). Statistics show that half of all new teachers have left the profession within five years (Woods & Weasmer, 2004) and that up to 10% leave after the first year (Inman & Marlow, 2004).

What can schools and districts do to stop them? One suggestion is a mentoring program. It is critical for them to have a support system early in their career. An important fact for special education teachers is that the mentor also be a special education teacher, even if that teacher works in a different building (Whitaker, 2000).

Invoking a sense of community is also important. Collaborative environments have the potential to benefit new teachers by preventing burnout, heightening teachers' sense of efficacy, and improving teachers' knowledge base (Brownell, et al., 1997). New teachers need a supportive community in which mentoring is not just an opportunity to give advice, but a two-way exchange of listening and questioning that should begin before the beginning teacher's first entrance into the school (Woods & Weasmer, 2004).

Stress, Stress, and More Stress

Stress seems to be one of the leading complaints among all teachers. What causes that stress can vary from job to job and school to school. Factors include role ambiguity, student discipline issues, insufficient resources, inadequate support, and excessive procedural demands (Kilgore, et al., 2003). Stress seems to top out in around the third year of teaching (Connolly, 2000). By this time their enthusiasm has begun to wane and they begin losing momentum.

Morvant et al. (1995) found that only half of special educators in their study felt that their workload was manageable. They also found that around one third said conflicting goals and expectation for their role to be a frequent source of stress. Problems with role overload and design have been strongly linked to special education attrition (Billingsly, 2004). Research results have suggested that role problems create stress (Gersten et al., 2001) and decrease job satisfaction (Cross & Billingsley, 1994).

Support and Empowerment

Support has been shown to be critical to teacher retention, particularly administrative support (Billingsly, 2004). Both new and veteran teachers felt that their administration did not always support them. Ax, et al. (2001) found that half of the teachers they surveyed cited lack of support as a reason for leaving. About half of that group specifically stated a lack of administrative support. Veteran teachers may feel more support though. Sixty-nine percent of the teachers Otto and Arnold (2005) surveyed who agreed or strongly agreed they had administrative support had more than five years experience.

Davis and Wilson (2000) surveyed teachers to see how teacher empowerment influenced job stress, satisfaction, and motivation. A significant indirect relationship was found. It would make sense then that teachers who stayed in their positions were almost four times more likely to perceive high administrative support and encouragement than those who left (Boe, et al., 1999). One complaint of veteran teachers was they had less and less say in the curriculum chosen for their classroom (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). This was also one of the top complaints from teachers 40 years ago (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Teachers who feel like they have a say in what happens in their classroom are more likely to stay in that classroom.

Conclusion

Many different things can affect a teacher's decision to leave a position. Some of these include increasing stress, lack of support, lack of empowerment, increasing accountability, and increasing student discipline issues. These reasons are similar to the reasons given by teachers over 40 years ago. If we are to continue to educate students at a level to be competitive with other countries, we need to find a way to keep quality teachers in positions longer. Surviving the first five years seems to be the key to longevity in the teaching profession. Some research has indicated that a strong, focused

mentoring program can go a long way to encouraging new teachers to stay beyond the first few years. Building a sense of community and personal empowerment has also been shown to keep teachers in positions for extended periods of time. Whatever a school or district can do to encourage their quality teachers to stay, it is vital that they do it.

Methodology

Research Design

This was a qualitative study using personal interviews to gather data through a series of open-ended questions.

Participants

Current and former special education teachers throughout the two districts were chosen trying to get the widest distribution of variables including short amount of time in position, long amount of time in position, resource positions, self-contained positions, instructional positions, elementary and middle school positions, and leadership positions. Teachers were contacted either in person or by email to assess their ability to participate. Of the ten teachers contacted, six were willing to participate. Consent forms were delivered and returned, and then appointments set up for the interviews. Of the teachers willing to participate, only five were able to meet for the interviews. Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and was conducted at a location requested by the interviewee.

Interview Instrument

The interview consisted of following 11 open-ended questions, which were asked by the interviewer with answers scribed on the question sheet. Some follow-up clarification questions were asked as necessary.

- What is your job title?
- Where do you work?
- How long have you been a teacher?
- How long have you been in this position?
- What position did you have before this one?
- What are the duties of your job?
- What part(s) of your job do you enjoy the most?
- What part(s) of your job do you enjoy the least?
- If this is not the only position you have had, what was the reason for the change?
- What are two things that could make your job better or easier?
- What are two things that could have made your last job better or easier?

Results

Teachers who participated in this study were interviewed once about the good and bad aspects of their current job and previous jobs as well as the reason for any job changes they had made. These data were analyzed for trends and reported here.

The experience level of the teachers who participated in this study ranged from five to 22 years and their current positions ranged from resource to instructional to even support staff. There were several major trends in what they felt was “good” and “bad” about their jobs. Overwhelmingly these teachers named working with students and helping them both academically and personally as the best aspect of their job. Along with working with the students, many also enjoyed working with their colleagues.

On the other side of the coin, trying to attain the “impossible” goals set by administration and the government ranked highest on the list of negative aspects of working in special education. Too much paperwork and not enough time to get done what is needed were also common complaints. There were varying answers given as ways to make their jobs easier or better and these seemed to depend on the respondent’s specific position. Despite the array of complaints voiced about being a special education teacher, the two major reasons for changing positions were surprising: location of the school or the commute time and just feeling it was time for a change.

When they did decide to change positions, it was most often very early in their career, or very late. Two of the teachers interviewed had more than 20 years experience. Both have had at least four different jobs. But at least three of them had come within the first five years of working as a teacher, while the last one has been in the last 3 years. Of the teachers who changed positions, only one had left special education to work in a general education classroom. Another had moved to a more administratively focused position, but still within the special education department.

This results section will describe the respondents’ feelings about their jobs, both positive and negative, as well as reasons for the reasons they had for finding new positions.

The Good

Teaching provides almost daily opportunities to feel good about what you do. Forging relationships with students and other faculty as well as making an impact on student’s lives ranked high with interviewees as the good aspects of being a teacher.

Making a difference

To be a teacher, it helps to be a “people person” so it only makes sense that working with students and colleagues tops the list of what is good about being a teacher.

I love getting to know the students, especially when the class is small and you can get to know them well.

It is really fun to co-teach. You learn so much by working together and bouncing ideas off each other.

My favorite part of my job is working with students when they are working and want to learn. I love it when I see the light in their eyes that says, "I get it."

I love the interaction with the kids and helping them learn. It's amazing to watch them mature, grow, and learn.

One teacher liked the creative outlet that teaching gives her.

Planning the lessons and deciding how to teach a lesson is such a creative outlet for me. I also like the creative problem solving that adapting curriculum allows me.

Other teachers appreciate the feeling of accomplishment that comes with student success.

I like providing a safe place for them to learn and seeing them feel good. I really enjoy helping them, making them realize what they can accomplish, and making them feel successful.

I call it my "warm fuzzy" feeling. You know, that feeling you get when you realize you are making a difference to them.

The Bad

Teachers in general seem to be continually asked to do more with less. Special education teachers especially are being asked to push the limits as to what they and their students can achieve. With such mandates as No Child Left Behind as well of the requirements of fulfilling the requirements of each student's Individual Education Plan, it is no wonder that paperwork and time constraints were at the top of the complaint list.

Expectations

Many teachers voiced the feeling of trying to "attain the unattainable." Special education students, by definition, are not working at grade level standards, but are accountable for passing the same standardized tests as general education students.

Assessing special education students at the same level as all other students makes teachers and students feel unsuccessful, like failures. I feel like I am trying to attain the unattainable.

The pressure to reach certain standards can sometimes be overwhelming. We are constantly trying to improve to a level that is always changing.

The government was not the only place special education teachers feel pressure from.

General education teachers and the administration are continually pushing special education students and teachers for more. There is so much pressure on everyone, but often special education gets a bad wrap for being the population that is not performing up to standards.

Paperwork

Photocopying, making lesson plans, grading papers, holding conferences with parents, and filling out report cards are tasks familiar to all teachers. Special education teachers often have additional requirements such as scheduling and attending IEP meetings, writing and updating goals, writing behavior plans, adapting curriculum, and administering achievement testing. These additional duties bring up two more common complaints: the enormous amount of paperwork required for documentation of how services are provided and feeling like that paperwork is taking time away from working with the students.

Because of all the paperwork and the constant meetings, I felt like I was never with my students. I was always missing working with the students.

I wish there was much less government paperwork involved in special education. Everything needs to be documented. So much time is spent on documentation.

Completing endless paperwork was not the only place these teachers felt a time crunch. Resource teachers often feel trying to keep up with what is happening in the general education classrooms is very time consuming.

I am working on two different teams trying to cover 17 students. It is impossible for me to know what is going on in each classroom. I spend so much time trying to keep up with what is being covered. I don't always know what is going on.

Caseload

Classroom sizes across the country have been slowly increasing and special education classrooms are no different. But with a population that has such high needs, even adding a few students to a teacher's caseload can have huge implications.

I had 15 students ranging in ability from Kindergarten to third grade. It was difficult to cover such a wide range of abilities on a daily basis with only myself in the classroom.

With a classroom of students that span such varying needs, it is difficult to meet all those needs. And those were just academic issues. When you throw in behavior problems, it makes it that much more difficult to meet those needs.

Behavior

Many special education students have behavior and social problems along with academic ones. This can take precious time away from academic instruction.

I started to get a little burnt out dealing with so many behavior issues on a daily basis.

I would have liked to have more help with behavior problems in my classroom. Behaviors were often so disruptive that it would lessen the amount of time I could spend on instruction.

Dealing with behavior management is a large part of my job. I am constantly trying to maintain a positive classroom environment.

Support

Some teachers felt that unsupportive administrators and parents did little to help maintain a positive classroom environment.

I think that having a supportive principal who wasn't afraid to discipline students would help my classroom a lot.

One of my least favorite parts of my job is trying to work with negative, unsupportive parents. Students know if their parents are going to back me up or not.

Making changes

So with all the good and bad that comes with being a teacher, what finally makes a person decide to leave one position for another? Unruly students? Unsupportive administration? Pressure to perform? Sometimes, but in this study, it was more likely something as simple as the length of the commute.

The commute was so long at my first job that when a position opened up closer to home, it only made sense to take it.

I switched because of the location of the school. I was driving an hour and a half a day and it was just too much.

Another common reason was simply change.

There were a lot of changes happening...new principal, several people let go...I just decided it was a sign for me to make a change also.

I just needed a change. I started out in an instructional classroom and thought I'd give resource a try.

After 20 years in special education, I decided it was time to give something else a try.

One teacher was looking to her future when deciding to make a move.

I wanted to take a step toward leadership, something that would eventually lead to an administrative position.

So what does all this information mean? It seems that there is no one reason that teachers decide to leave a position. It seems to be a very personal decision. What may be right for one teacher may be totally wrong for another. It does seem to show that the relationships formed with both students and colleagues have much more influence on the decision than money or job duties. Not one of my interviewees mentioned pay as a consideration for leaving. Neither did they mention stress or responsibilities as a reason for moving. But several mentioned that having a good relationship with other staff members helped them through difficult periods in their jobs.

Discussion

My study revealed many reasons teachers enjoy their jobs as well as several things they did not enjoy. While some of these reasons were similar to those found in other studies I researched, many of them were much different. The following is a comparison of some of those items.

Administrative Support

Several research studies showed that administrative support was a big factor in teacher job satisfaction. Support has been shown to be critical to teacher retention, particularly administrative support (Billingsly, 2004). Ax et al. (2001) found that half of the teachers they surveyed cited lack of support as a reason for leaving. About half the respondents in that group specifically stated lack of administrative support. Most of these teachers were new. Veteran teachers were more likely to feel they had administrative support, proposing the idea that they were still there because of the support they felt at that school.

Of the teachers I interviewed, administrative support was only a small factor in their job satisfaction. The one complaint they did voice about administrative support was in relation to behavior management and principals following through with discipline. The only other reference to administration in my study was tied to performance on standardized tests.

Empowerment

The teachers I interviewed made several references to enjoying “being their own boss.” They stated having control of what and how to teach in their classroom as one of the perks of the job. One teacher called the planning of lessons a “creative outlet” for her.

The literature I reviewed also cited teacher empowerment over their environment as an important factor in teacher satisfaction. Davis and Wilson (2000) surveyed teachers to see how teacher empowerment influenced their job satisfaction and found that a significant indirect relationship. Boe et al. (1999) stated that teachers who stayed in their positions were almost four times as likely to perceive high administrative support and encouragement in their professional decisions as those who left.

Stress

Stress comes from many areas including time management, caseloads, job responsibilities, performance/assessment, and behavior problems. Several of the teachers I interviewed discussed the stress they have. The two major sources of stress were completing all the requirements of their job in the allotted amount of time and the level at which students were expected to perform.

Kilgore, et al. (2003) cited factors that can cause stress include role ambiguity, students discipline issues, insufficient resources, inadequate support, and excessive procedural demands. These were all mentioned by at least one of the teachers I interviewed. Almost all of them mentioned that more money for curriculum and technology would be a change that would make their jobs much easier.

Morvant, et al. (1995) found that only half of special educators felt their workload was manageable. One teacher I interviewed fell into that category stating that in both of her positions she had too many students and never felt like she was able to meet all their needs adequately. Another stated although she was meeting her students' basic needs, a lighter caseload would allow her to help even more.

Relationships

All of the teachers I interviewed made some reference to relationships either with students or teachers as one of the major positives of their jobs. Indeed the research I found supports this idea. The two major suggestions for teacher retention was a mentoring program for new teachers (Whitaker, 2000) and invoking a sense of community among teachers Brownell et al., (1997).

None of the teachers I talked with mentioned any structured mentoring program or any administrative measures to encourage a sense of community. They talked more about independently seeking out people in the building who they could exchange ideas with on a regular basis. Many discussed particular school years that were extremely stressful to them and how having a colleague or group of teachers with whom they could discuss problems as the only thing that got them through some years.

No mention was made of the positive relationship between teachers and students in the research of literature that I completed. Only the negative aspects of dealing with student behaviors were discussed. In the interviews, though, that student-teacher bond was extremely important to every teacher. More than one only listed working with students as the good parts of their job. They discussed working with them, helping them learn, seeing them mature and grow, getting to know them, and seeing them become successful as just a few of the aspects they enjoyed about working with students.

Conclusions/Implications

Although several common themes were found between the literature review and the interviews, there were some surprising differences. No where in the interviews was teacher salary or the condition of the building mentioned. Several researched articles, though, did mention these as complaints for many teachers. Also, as stated previously none of the literature mentioned the teacher-student relationship as a positive aspect of the job, but all of the persons interviewed for this study made at least one reference to this relationship as a major aspect of their job. Lastly, and maybe most surprising, little reference was made to administrative support as a reason for changing positions in the

subjects interviewed, but a significant portion of the literature focuses on the frustration teachers feel from the lack of administrative support.

Based on both the literature and the data collected from the interviews, I would say the one most important suggestion would be for schools and districts to closely monitor, and even encourage, the relationships among teachers in their building. Building a sense of community for veteran teachers, as well as fostering the relationships of new teachers with those veteran teachers, seems the best way to encourage teachers to stay in the same position. With the turnover rate for new teachers (less than five years) near 50%, it would make sense to have an extended mentoring program to help these teachers adjust to and deal with all that new teachers are faced with. Making sure veteran teachers continue to feel support from administration about what is happening in their classrooms will help promote a positive atmosphere for everyone and encourage them to mentor new teachers.

In future studies, there are a few areas that would be good to explore. In this study, the subjects had a variety of backgrounds and experience, but could have been more diverse still. Several subjects were not able to participate that could have had varying views from the ones who did participate. Expanding and increasing the number of subjects interviewed would be helpful. Also, the districts that the participants were from were large urban/suburban districts that were above the state average in salary and education. Seeing how the answers of teachers from smaller, more rural schools compared would be interesting.

References

- Ax, M., Conderman, G., & Stephens, J.T. (2001) Principal support essential for retaining special educators. *NAASSP Bulletin*, 85 (621), 66-71.
- Billingsley, B.S. (2004). Special education teacher retention and attrition. *The Journal of Special Education*, 38(1), 39-55.
- Billingsley, B.S., & Tomchin, E.M. (1992). Four beginning LD teachers: What their experiences suggest for trainers and employers. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 7, 104-112.
- Boe, E.E., Cook, L.H., Bobbitt, S.A., & Weber, A.L. (1998.) *Retention and attrition of teachers at the district level: National trends in special and general education*. Reston, VA: National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education.
- Boyer L. & Gillespie, P. (2000). Keeping the committed: The importance of induction and support programs for new special educators. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 33(1), 10-15.
- Brownell, M.T., Smith, S.W., McNellis, J., & Miller, M.D. (1997). Teachers working together: what teacher educators and researchers should know. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 20, 340-359.
- Connolly, R. (2000). Why do good teacher leave the profession? *Momentum*, 31(3), 55-57.
- Cross, L.H., & Billingsley, B. (1994). Testing a model of special educators' intent to stay in teaching. *Exceptional Children*, 60, 411-421.
- Gersten, R., Keating, T., Yovanoff, P., & Harniss, M.K. (2001). Working in special education: Factors that enhance special educators' intent to stay. *Exceptional Children*, 67, 549-567.
- Inman, D. & Marlow, L. (2004). Teacher retention: Why do beginning teachers remain in the profession? *Education* 124(4), 605-614.
- Kilgore, K.L. & Griffin, C. C. (1998). Beginning special educators: Problems of practice and the influence of school context. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 21, 155-173.
- Kilgore, K., Griffin, C. Wilborn, A.O., & Winn, J (2003). The problems of beginning special education teachers: exploring the contextual factors influencing their work. *Action Teacher Educator*, 25(1), 38-47.

- Morvant, M., Gersten, R., Gillman, J., Keating, T., & Blake, G. (1995). *Attrition/retention of urban special education teachers: Multi-faceted research and strategic action planning*. Final performance report, Volume 1. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED338154)
- Nichols, A.S. & Sosnowsky, F. L. (2002). Burnout among special education teachers in self-contained cross-categorical classroom. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 25(1), 71-86.
- Otto, J. & Arnold, M. (2005). A study of experienced special education teachers' perceptions of administrative support. *College Student Journal*, 39(2), 253-259.
- Stempien, L.R. & Loeb, R.C. (2002). Difference in job satisfaction between general education and special education teachers: Implications for retention. *Remedial and Special Education*, 23(5), 258-267.
- Theobald, N.D. & Michael, R.S. (2001). Teacher turnover in the Midwest: Who stays, leaves, and moves? Policy issues. *Illinois, North Central Regional Educational Lab*, 10, 1-7.
- Whitaker, S. D. (2000). Mentoring beginning special education teachers and the relationship to attrition. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 546-566.
- Woods, A.M. & Weasmer, J. (2004). Maintaining job satisfaction: Engaging professional as active participants. *Clearing House*, 77(3), 118-121.