

**Understanding the Contours of the Special Education Teacher Shortage:  
A Review of the Literature**

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## **Understanding the Contours of the Special Education Teacher Shortage: A Review of the Literature**

The shortage of special education teachers has been called a crisis. The supply of qualified special education teachers has been especially low for decades (Nichols, Bicard, Bicard, & Casey, 2008, p. 597). Recognized as a problem, the shortage was highlighted in the prominent 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. This literature review will assess what is known about the shortage of special education teachers and survey some of the efforts to try to correct the problem. First, we examine how the teacher shortage has been identified and measured. We then turn to issues related to the recruitment and certification of special education teachers. Finally, we assess efforts focused on retaining current special education teachers.

### **The Special Education Teacher Shortage**

Nichols, et al. (2008) briefly examine the shortage in special education teachers, emphasizing statistics which clarify the problem. The production of teachers in special education actually increased during the 1990s, but the demand for more teachers severely outstripped the supply. They also report that the shortage in special education is greater than the shortages of qualified teachers in other areas. Recent “data indicate that just .86 teachers were prepared for each available position in special education, while more than twice as many teachers were produced for each available position in elementary education” (Nichols, et al., 2008, pp. 597-598; Boe, et al., 1999). The shortage is only part of the problem. Because of a lack of qualified teachers, about 10 percent of the special education teachers were less than fully certified in the area of their primary assignment (Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, & Terhanian, 1998). The shortage results in some students with special needs never being taught by a fully-certified special education teacher (Esposito and Lal, 2005, p. 100; Andrews, Miller, Evans, & Smith,

2003, p. 74). Nichols, et al., (2008, p. 598) argue that the teacher shortage is “exacerbated by the need to diversify the field.”

In their review of research on the shortage of special education teachers, McLeskey, Tyler, and Flippin (2004) assess the data using a meta-analytic methodology to find the factors that influence the supply and demand of special education teachers. The researchers pull together data from a number of professional organizations, and combine it with data gathered from the research literature to better understand the “severe, chronic shortage of fully certified special education teachers in the United States” (McLeskey, et al., 2004, p. 5). For a researcher interested in learning about the teacher shortage, these researchers identify the main sources of data. Most data come from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, the National Center for Education Statistics’ Schools and Staff Survey (SASS) and the American Association of Employment in Education (AAEE).

McLesky, et al. (2008, p. 17) summarize what is known about teacher supply and demand:

- The shortage of special education teachers is chronic and long-term and will get worse;
- There is a severe shortage of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers in the workforce, and this shortage is likely to get worse;
- The shortage of special education teachers is pervasive across geographic regions and localities in the United States;
- The shortage of special education teachers is greater than teacher shortages in any other area, including mathematics and science;
- Reducing teacher attrition is necessary if the teacher shortage is to be successfully addressed;

- The teaching conditions in special education (Kozleski et al, 2000) are a major factor contributing to the teacher shortage; and
- Insufficient numbers of new teachers are being prepared to meet the ongoing demand.

McLesky, et al. (2008, p. 17-18) admit that there remains much to be learned about the teacher shortage, both generally and in regards to special education. They ask several questions in order to guide future research:

- How do we attract more teachers to special education?
- What do so many teachers transfer from special to general education?
- How do we attract more culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD, in the literature) individuals to special education?
- What strategies are effective in retaining well-qualified teachers?
- What large-scale, systemic strategies used by state and local education agencies are effective in attracting teachers to the profession and retaining them once they are teaching?
- How qualified are the teachers who are categorized as uncertified in a given state?
- What policy initiatives have states used to address teacher supply and demand, and which of these initiatives have been most effective?

Boe (2006) assesses the long-term trends in the demand and supply of special education teachers and finds some evidence that moves the research closer to answering the questions raised by McLesky, et al. (2004). After examining the data, Boe (2006) presents a broad outline of possible solutions to the shortage problem. There are two broad approaches to addressing the shortage. “One approach is to reduce teacher demand; the other is to increase teacher supply” (Boe 2006, p. 147). Reducing demand can be achieved using one of the following strategies:

- Improve the retention of qualified special education teachers through reduced exit attrition and transfer to general education;
- Redesign the education process, such as by using technology or teacher aids more extensively, thus reducing the need for fully-qualified special education teachers;
- Reduce the number of students classified with disabilities; and
- Increase the proportion of instruction provided by general education teachers for students with disabilities, or increase inclusion practices (Boe, 2006, p 147).

Boe (2006, p. 148) sees “little reason to expect that the need for a much larger supply [of special education teachers] will be offset substantially in the future.” For this reason, four strategies aimed at increasing the supply of special education teachers are suggested:

- Increased transfer of qualified general education teachers to teaching positions in special education;
- Improved recruitment of qualified teachers entering from the pool of reserve teachers, primarily qualified teachers returning to the classroom after some absence;
- Expansion of initiatives to upgrade the qualifications of unqualified employed special education teachers; and
- Expansion of teacher preparation programs in special education to increase the production of novice teachers.

The question of qualifications has been a key element of research into the teacher shortage in special education. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* requires that all teachers hold full state certification in order to be considered “qualified.” Boe and Cook (2006) consider the law’s definition and its affect on the teacher shortage. After carefully examining the data, the researchers find that the “shortage of fully certified special education teachers has been chronic,

increasing, and serious” (Boe and Cook, 2006, p. 455). The researchers issue a call for a reversal in the decline in the production of degree graduates from teacher preparation programs in special education (Boe and Cook, 2006, p. 457-458). One strategy emphasized by Boe and Cook (2006) is to make a teaching career more appealing in order to reduce attrition out of the field. This strategy also could help in attracting more individuals to teaching generally, and special education specifically. They call for additional research into why teachers move from general education to special education as well as the impact of teacher qualifications on the decision to leaving completely (Boe and Cook, 2006, p. 458).

In their brief presentation, Nichols, et al. (2008), summarize the teacher shortage problem, while also presenting some solutions. One problem the researchers identify is the lack of diversity among special education teachers. This is a pressing problem because “minority students, in particular African American and Hispanic males, are overrepresented in special education” (Nichols, et al., 2008, p. 598). Two strategies are usually adopted to address the lack of qualified teachers in special education. The primary strategy is alternative licensure or certification. Most states have some form of alternative certification, but Nichols, et al. (2008, p. 599) correctly report that there has been little research on the topic. Kanstoroom and Finn (1999) suggest that the lack of research on alternative certification is due to the fact that programs vary widely across the states, making comparison more difficult.

Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, and Misra (2007) describe the alternative route (AR) teacher preparation programs in special education. Among the features of AR programs the researchers emphasize is the fact that AR programs are more successful than traditional programs in attracting African American and Hispanic participants. This is due to the fact that AR programs tend to reflect the demographics of the communities in which the programs are located

(Humphrey & Wechsler 2007). Rosenberg, et al., (2007, pp 237-238) reach the following conclusions regarding special education certification through AR programs:

- Large numbers of AR programs exist, particularly in states that are experiencing significant shortages of special educators;
- Many programs provide extended opportunities for training through coursework, distance education, and on-site support through university supervision;
- Most AR programs in special education adhere to the practices recommended by the United States Department of Education in recruiting widely and selecting carefully;
- The backgrounds of participants who are recruited into AR programs and who ultimately persist in their new careers are a rich and important sources of data for researchers and policy makers;
- The largest group of AR participants is mid-career changers; and
- Many special education AR programs appear similar to traditional teacher preparation programs in numerous ways, but there are some differences.

Nichols, et al. (2008, p. 599) also point to inclusion as one way of working within the constraints caused by the teacher shortage. It is clear that inclusion was not originally devised as a way to work around the shortage, but educational administrators appear to have used it this way.

Rice and Goessling (2005) consider one of the features related to the lack of diversity among special education teachers: the challenges in recruiting and retaining men to the field. The lack of diverse special education teachers is a critical issue facing teacher preparation programs. Male students may not consider education as a career because of a lack of male teachers as role models. This is especially true in special education. Rice and Goessling (2005)

summarize the research that has identified the factors that contribute to the discrepancies between men and women entering education as a career:

- A career as a teacher has a low social status compared with the prestige of being an engineer, for example;
- A career in education usually brings a lower salary than other career options;
- There is a perception that teaching is “women’s work”;
- There is the potential for false accusations relating to how male teachers are scrutinized for wanting to work with children; and
- There are few peers with whom to work when a male teacher takes a position in a school (Rice and Goessling, 2005, p 349).

The researchers propose several strategies for counteracting these factors. One of their top recommendations is that there should be both male and female education professors participating in preservice training. Preservice education programs can create opportunities for male preservice teachers to gather together in a more social, less classroom environment. Male students should be matched with male advisors. Smaller cohort groups of male students could be placed in teacher education courses together, engendering a greater sense of community. Male student teachers should be matched with cooperating male teachers (Rice and Goessling, 2005, p. 354-355).

In a provocative statement, Nichols, et al. (2008, p. 599) identify legislation as one of the causes of the teacher shortage. The 1997 and 2004 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 seem to have exacerbated the shortage. These laws increased the number of students eligible to receive special education while also specifying higher standards for special education

teachers. Following from this line of argument, it would appear that the best solution for the teacher shortage would be to severely curtail the requirements specified in these laws.

### **Seeking Certification in Special Education**

A major factor in dealing with the shortage of special education teachers is how to encourage individuals to seek certification in special education. Some state and local agencies (like the Texas Education Agency) use recruiting strategies such as college scholarships, tax credits, and loan forgiveness to attract general education teachers to education (McLeskey, et al., 2004; Tyler, Cantou-Clarke, Esterling, & Klepper, 2003; Berry, 2008). Boe (2006) recommends increasing the supply of special educators by increasing the number of general education teachers who seek additional certification in special education. A growing number of school districts are seeking to grow their own special educators by focusing on their current staff and providing financial support for these individuals to seek special education certification. Many districts are looking at their paraprofessionals and encouraging them to seek special education certification by providing release time and financial considerations (Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007).

Understanding why individuals seek certification in special education is an area of research that is largely undermined. Some empirical research has found, “Not surprisingly many special educators had some meaningful contact with a person with a disability as they were growing up – a sibling, a neighbor, friend or maybe they worked in a summer camp for children with disabilities” (Crutchfield, 1997, p. 2; Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Lenk, 1995; Marks, Matson, & Barraza, 2005; Zascavage, Winterman, Armstrong, & Schroeder-Steward, 2008, p. 19).

This “meaningful contact” finding could easily guide recruitment strategies as suggested by Zascavage, et al. (2008). The researchers argue that such contacts should occur at the high school-level, especially as peer support groups. “Students who join those with special needs in ongoing peer support groups characteristically develop positive opinions about individuals with disabilities” (Zascavage, et al., 2008, p. 20; Burns, Cero, & Storey, 1999; Carter, Hughes, Copeland, & Breen, 2001; Fisher, Pumpian, & Cox, 1998; Hemstetler, Peck, & Giangreco, 1994).

Marks, et al. (2005) conducted a limited, qualitative research project involving individuals that had siblings with a disability. Through a series of interviews, the researchers sought to better understand how the sibling’s disability and the relationship with that sibling affected the individual’s decision to pursue a career in special education. They found that several characteristics of the individuals were interesting. The responsibility for the sibling with a disability had some effect on career decisions. All of the participants in the study shared strong family connections and reported being very involved in their siblings’ lives. The parents, however, did not seem to push this responsibility on the respondent. It seemed “the presence of parental values that fostered the close interactions of siblings may have positively influenced our participants’ career decisions” (Marks, et al., 2005, 215). The nature of the disability also played a role in the career decisions of the nondisabled sibling. Gender played a role, with most of the participants in the study being female. Finally, birth order also was a factor in responsibility for the disabled sibling, but the researchers were unclear about how much birth order affected career decisions.

The Marks, et al., study provides a potential avenue for recruiting special educators. Schools and departments of education in higher education institutions could ascertain which of

their students already seeking education certification have siblings or relatives with disabilities and provide them with information about careers in special education. This form of microtargeted recruitment could prove to be cost-effective.

Zascavage, et al. (2008) examine peer support groups for students with disabilities in high school. The goal of their study was to identify possible recruitment strategies to increase the number of persons seeking certification in special education. The research is limited because the dependent variable is the presence or absence of support groups; however, their premise is valid. It is through these peer support groups that high school students will be exposed to other students with disabilities, and it is possible that some of these high school students may then consider careers in special education. Certainly, the existing peer support groups should be considered as recruiting vehicles.

### **Retaining Special Education Teachers**

A key piece in understanding the special education teacher shortage is knowing the reasons why special education teachers leave the field. Billingsley (2004, p. 39) identified several different types of attrition. Some teachers leave the teaching profession while others transfer to other teaching or educational positions. Research has found that the field of special education loses many teachers to general education, with a significantly higher percentage of special educators transferring to general education (Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, & Weber, 1998).

Research on special education teacher retention and attrition focuses largely on the reasons why teachers stay or leave the field. Knowing these reasons helps in the development of appropriate policies and practices to keep special educators in special education classrooms. In a follow-up to a previous research review (Billingsley 1993), Billingsley (2004) searched electronic databases to find research-based articles and reports on special education teacher

retention and attrition. After reviewing twenty research articles published in the preceding decade, the researcher determined that “teacher and work factors are critical to special educators’ job satisfaction and their subsequent career decisions” (Billingsley, 2004, p. 50). The findings are summarized as follows:

- Younger and inexperienced special educators are more likely to leave than their older, more experienced counterparts;
- Uncertified teachers are more likely to leave than certified teachers;
- Special educators with higher test scores (e.g., National Teacher Exam) are more likely to leave than those with lower scores; and
- Teachers’ personal circumstances (e.g., family move, decision to stay home with children) often contribute to attrition (Billingsley, 2004, p. 50).

After thoroughly reviewing the literature, Billingsley (2005, pp. 53-54) provides some guidance to policymakers. Her primary suggestion is that policymakers interested in reducing attrition among special education teachers must focus on the development of better work environments. The work environment must allow the teachers to be effective in their work. In general, Billingsley (2005, p. 54) advises “a holistic look at creating positive work environments.” Creating programs that provide beginning teachers with mentors and career development will not work if the teachers are not granted reasonable workloads.

### **Conclusion**

There is a large body of research examining the causes and cures for the shortage in special education teachers. Even with the different methods utilized to study these questions, there is little conflict in the findings and conclusions presented by this body of work.

Policymakers interested in finding ways to ameliorate the shortage would be well-served to

peruse the research literature. Researchers provide a clear picture of the problem and many also offer their suggested solutions.

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