

Burnt Out: Special Education Teacher Perspectives on Job Related Stress and Job Satisfaction

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The Problem

Since the 1980's there has been a pervasive shortage of special education teachers in the United States. Over the years, the shortage has been attributed to causes such as low enrollment in teacher preparation programs and inadequate pay. However, the most influential factor plaguing this area of education has been identified as special education teacher attrition due to burnout.

Research shows that special education teachers are more likely to leave their job than teachers in any other area of education. Additionally, approximately 50% of new special education teachers will leave their position within the first 5 years of teaching. Teacher burnout and teacher turnover is detrimental to special education students and therefore, must be addressed. With stress leading to burnout being the most influential reason for the special education teacher shortage, solutions to alleviate stressors for special education teachers are extremely important.

Results

Preliminary results are based on data gathered from a pilot of the study questionnaire.

- **Areas of stress:**
 - Lack of provision of materials and necessary trainings from the district.
 - Large caseload of students with high levels of needs.
 - Feelings of worry regarding legal responsibilities.
- **Job satisfaction:**
 - Inadequate compensation.
 - Feelings of love and fulfillment from working with students.
- **Ideas to improve work conditions:**
 - Increase administrative support.
 - Provide teachers with more professional development and materials.
 - Provide teachers with adequate compensation.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to identify the perspectives of current elementary school special education teachers on what factors cause stress in their profession and to identify solutions they feel may alleviate or eliminate these stressors. This study sought to gain a better understanding of the issues currently felt by special educators in the field and to collect possible solutions to fix the problems at hand.

This research study was designed to address the following question: *What are the main factors currently causing stress for special educators? How do special educators feel some, if any, of these stressors could be alleviated?*

Methodology

- Qualitative narrative research study conducted in one Southern California school district. Participants included elementary special education teachers.
- Data were collected through an electronic questionnaire created through Qualtrics. The questionnaire began with three preliminary questions gathering data on level of education, years of teaching experience, and instructional delivery model. Then, the participants were asked ten open-ended questions about job-related stress, job satisfaction, and ideas on solutions to improve the special education teacher work environment.
- Data were analyzed using inductive analysis to identify common themes in participants' responses.

Implications

The results from this study provide school district administration with perspectives from current special education teachers. These perspectives provide valuable insight into the areas of special education that may need to be adjusted to decrease special educators' feelings of job-related stress and increase feelings of job satisfaction. The implementation of some of the solutions offered by the special education teachers in this study may improve the work environment of special education teachers. It is possible that such changes could impact the special education teacher shortage.

Factors Attributing to Special Education Teacher Burnout

