

Sustaining and retaining beginning special educators: It takes a village

Rebecca Swanson Gehrke*, Kathleen McCoy

Arizona State University, P.O. Box 872011, Tempe, AZ 85287 2011, USA

Abstract

The need to support and retain beginning teachers has become critical given: (1) the shortage of teachers in certain disciplines, and (2) the current emphasis on teacher qualifications and student achievement. In this study, five first year special education teachers in the southwestern section of the United States provided information on the persons and activities that supplied them with much needed and valued support. The results indicate that having a strong network of support and a variety of resources positively influenced these teachers' ability to focus on student learning and on their intent to remain in their positions.

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1. Context of the problem

Over the last 30 years, a number of countries have been involved in educational reforms. Many of those reforms focus on producing citizens who can advance the economy of their country and create more wealth for their nations. Accordingly, a majority of recent educational reforms are standard based such as those in the United States (Finn & Rebarber, 1992), United Kingdom (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2001), Spain (Boyd-Barrett & O'Malley, 1995), Australia and New Zealand (Ginsburg, Cooper, Ragu, & Zegarra, 1990), Poland and Hungary (Fretwell & Wheeler, 2001a, 2001b), and China (Liang, 2001). Simultaneously schools began to experience unprecedented need to meet

diverse needs in the classrooms, which in turn created a need for teachers who could work with diverse populations. Keeping teachers motivated to stay in the workforce is an international challenge. A large percentage of teachers leave their positions after 5–6 years (European Trade Union Committee for Education, 2005). Strategies for encouraging teachers to stay in the profession, especially those working with diverse populations and those just beginning their careers, have become a worldwide concern (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002).

In the United States, for example, legislative policies, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), require that every classroom where core subjects are taught be staffed by a highly qualified teacher and that special education teachers be accountable for the progress of their students within the context of the general education curriculum. At the same time,

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 480 965 6156.

E-mail address: www.Rebecca.Gehrke@asu.edu (R.S. Gehrke).

the shortage of licensed special education teachers continues to pose problems for complying with those mandates in school districts in the United States. While increasing the number of graduates of special education departments may be a partial solution to the problem, improving the retention rate of those already in the field is also key (Ingersoll, 2003). Smith and Ingersoll (2004) also report that first year special education teachers are two and one-half times more likely to leave than teachers in other disciplines further complicating the problem. This American study, then, sought information related to the experiences of beginning special education teachers.

Improving the working conditions of beginning teachers may be one immediate, cost effective means of reducing the number of teachers leaving the profession in the early stages of their careers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The work of Susan Moore Johnson and her associates confirms that beginning teachers who viewed their school environments as supportive were more likely to stay in those schools and in the teaching profession (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Johnson's group continues to discover that the professional culture of the 'village' into which new general education teachers are inducted influences their career decisions and their teaching practices.

1.1. Theoretical perspectives

One theoretical perspective for the study relates to the socialisation of new teachers; or, in other words, how teachers become integrated into the profession as well as into their schools as organisations. This integration, or socialisation, is influenced by their individual backgrounds, their teacher preparation, and the context of their workplace (Lacey, 1985; Zeicher & Gore, 1990). This process by which teachers are integrated into their workplaces consists of interacting with colleagues, having opportunities for professional growth, and being able to access resources that support their practise (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). In turn, others have found that an environment that promotes growth and job satisfaction may improve commitment to the profession (Ingersoll, 2001; Kortman, 2005; Quaglia & Davis, 1991; Quaglia, Marion, & McIntire, 1991). Our study, then, examined one aspect of improving those working conditions, i.e. the support and information offered to beginning special education

teachers in the form of structured induction programmes and activities. An attempt was made to identify factors in their environments that contributed to their professional growth and their sense of satisfaction in their special education teaching assignments.

A second perspective for the study takes into consideration the unique concerns of teachers as they begin careers (Gold, 1996; Veenman, 1984). Beginning teachers experience stages of professional and personal growth as they journey from a novice consumed with mere survival to an expert teacher concerned with student learning and achievement (Berliner, 1988; Huling-Austin, 1992; Moir, 1999). Based on this perspective of teacher development, experts in the field identified the need to provide support for teachers in the beginning of their careers. As a result of these findings in the United States, programmes and activities targeting this population of teachers emerged. Formal induction was defined as "a planned program intended to provide some systematic and sustained assistance to beginning teachers" (Huling-Austin, 1990). A large body of literature related to American research continues to support the claim that induction programs designed specifically to meet the needs of beginning teachers have the potential to increase teacher retention as well as improve teacher practise (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Gold, 1996; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In their review of literature published in 2000, Arrends and Ragazio-DiGilio found that the goals of structured induction programmes in North American schools had not changed significantly in the past decades. Those goals continue to include: improving teacher practise, increasing teacher retention, promoting the well-being of beginning teachers, and transmitting the culture of the school to beginning teachers (Arrends & Ragazio-DiGilio, 2000).

1.2. Induction programmes and special educators

The induction of beginning special education teachers is compounded by the additional demands of a special education teaching assignment. A review of the research found the following factors typical of the concerns of special educators: mainstreaming and inclusion, consulting and collaborating with general education teachers as well as other service providers, completing paperwork in the form of Individualised Education Plans (IEP),

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