

# **Motivations of Future Special Education Teachers**

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# The Study

# Survey

- Motivations for choosing a career in Special Education
  - Ability
  - Personal Utility
  - Social Utility
  - Influences
  - Demand
  - Return
  - Prior Experiences

# Survey

- Career Plans
  - Planned longevity as Educator
  - Planned longevity as Special Educator
- Future Plans – anticipated reasons for leaving Special Education
  - Personal
  - Financial
  - Work-related
  - Switch to General Education

# Respondents

- 169 CMU Undergraduates
- Special Education Majors
  - 68% Cognitive Impairment
  - 32% Emotional Impairment
- 98% Caucasian
- 92% Female
- 89% non-disabled
- 87% 3.0 – 3.5 GPA

# The Problem

# Shortage

- Nationwide shortage of Special Education teachers
- Many school districts report difficulty finding sufficient numbers of qualified [Special Education] teachers
- (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2006-07 Edition)

# Attrition

- 13.2 % of Special Education teachers leave the field each year
- 7.2 % transfer to General Education
- 39% - 43% of new Special Education teachers **quit** within their first 5 years on the job.

- Commission on the Conditions for Special Education Teaching and Learning, 2000.

- Plash, Shawn & Piotrowski, Chris. 2006.



# Reasons for Leaving

- ADMINISTRATIVE
  - 57% inadequate admin. support
  - 52% too much paperwork
  - 48% not enough time for teaching students
  - 45% inadequate resources
  - 35% low pay for amount of work
  - 31% lack of necessary supplies

- Kaff, Marilyn, 2004.

# Reasons for Leaving

- CLASSROOM

- 57% Broad range of student needs
- 33% Lack of student respect
- 29% Too much unpaid work
- 26% Too much time on non-instructional tasks
- 26% inadequate training to handle student needs

# Reasons for Leaving

- Personal
  - 41% Stress & burnout
  - 14% Retirement
- Edgar, Eugene & Pair, Anne. 2005.

# Reasons for Leaving

- **Poor working conditions** including
    - isolation, lack of support, and
    - lack of necessary supplies & equipment
  - **Bad job design** including
    - unrealistic expectations
    - excessive time on non-teaching tasks
  - **Inadequate preparation**
    - for realities of the work and
    - for teaching students with many different disabilities
- Gersten, Russell, et al. 2001.

The image features a central text element 'The Dream' set within a decorative frame. The frame is composed of numerous concentric, slightly offset rectangular lines that create a tunnel-like perspective. The color gradient transitions from a deep purple on the outer edges to a bright yellow in the center, where the text is located. The text itself is in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

# The Dream



**Reasons  
Undergraduates  
Choose a Career  
in Special Education**

# Ability

- 88% Good at working with special needs children
- 87% Good match for skills & abilities
- 90% Personality suited to Special Ed.
- 57% Better at Special Ed. than General Ed.

# Social Utility

- 98% Love working with children
- 97% Ability to influence the future
- 94% Contribution to Society
- 77% Combat unfair social conditions



# Return

- 58% Special Ed. students more interesting
- 65% Work with small groups and individuals
- 54% Work with students for several years

# Experiences

- 72% Volunteer work with Special Ed. students

# Motivation

Undergraduates choose Special Education because they like working with special needs students and want to make a difference for these children.

Glew & Hoffman, 2007.

# What Happens?

- Only 3% of undergraduate Special Education majors plan to leave the field within 5 years...

- Glew & Hoffman, 2007.



**The Reality**

# Stress

“Special education teachers are under considerable stress due to heavy workloads and administrative tasks. They must produce a substantial amount of paperwork ... and work under the threat of litigation ... The physical and emotional demands of the job cause some special education teachers to leave the occupation”

Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2006-07 Edition, Teachers—Special Education , on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos070.htm> (visited November 09, 2007).

# Paperwork

82% of experienced Special Education Teachers say that paperwork interferes with their teaching duties

Billingsley, Bonnie. 2003.

# Paperwork takes as much time as lesson planning

- Special Education teachers spend **5 hours per week** outside of class on **paperwork**
- Special Education teachers spend **5 hours per week** outside of class **preparing lessons**
- Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education. 2003.



# Paperwork takes as much time as:

- Grading papers
- Communicating with parents
- Collaborating with colleagues
- Attending IEP meetings &
- Supervising Paraprofessionals
- **COMBINED**

- Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education. 2003.

# Inadequate Preparation

- Most Special Education teachers serve students from at least 3 different disability categories. They are typically trained in only one area.

# Inadequate Preparation

- Future Special Educators typically receive little or **no instruction** in:
  - organization and workload management,
  - dealing with parents,
  - collaborating with general educators,
  - working with administrators.

# Lack of Support

- Many Special Education teachers report that Administrators and General Education colleagues do not understand, value, or support their work.

• Kaff, Marilyn. 2004.

# Lack of Support

Administrators consistently rate all aspects of Special Educators' working conditions more highly than do Special Education Teachers.

Administrators do not understand the difficulties faced by Special Educators.

# No Time to Teach

- Many Special Education teachers report that teaching students is only a minor part of their job, not their primary responsibility.

• Piotrowski, Chris, & Plash, Shawn.n. 2005.

# Reality / Expectation Mismatch

- Special Education teachers are leaving the field because their jobs are not rewarding.
- They spend too much time on non-teaching tasks and not enough time with students.
- They are expected to do jobs for which they are not prepared.
- Their work is not appreciated.
- **It's not the job they signed up for.**



# Possible Solutions



# Paperwork

- Reduce the burden of paperwork for Special Educators.
  - Assign some administrative tasks to non-teaching personnel.
  - Streamline paperwork requirements at federal and state levels.
  - Enhance appropriate computerization of forms.

# Support

- Teach current administrators to understand and appreciate the work of Special Educators
  - Professional Development opportunities through professional organizations
  - Publications in professional journals
- Require coursework related to Special Education in all Educational Administration degree programs.

# Support

- Develop school environments in which Special Educators are included rather than isolated.
- Provide opportunities for professional development.
- Allow Special Educators to exercise their creativity.
- Say “thank you!”

• Gersten, Russell, et al. 2001.

# Support

- Provide recognition for successful and long-serving Special Educators through:
  - CAUSE (Citizens Alliance to Uphold Special Education) and other parent groups
  - CEC (Council for Exceptional Children) and other professional organizations
  - MDE (Michigan Department of Education) or other state-level agencies

# Support

- Enhance support from General Education colleagues through:
  - Professional development opportunities related to inclusion and other special education issues
  - Publications in widely-read professional journals
  - Require all future general education teachers to complete coursework related to special education.

# Preparation

- Prepare future Special Education teachers to work with students from several disability categories.
- Provide training related to many non-teaching aspects of a Special Educator's job.
- Enhance early exposure to experienced Special Education Teachers who can give accurate, current information about career realities.

# Funding

Federal Special Education funding has been enacted, but is not being paid as required by the current law.

Improved funding could provide increased staffing levels, better professional development, and adequate paid time for non-teaching tasks.