

# The Working Conditions and Induction Support of Early Career Special Educators

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article presents a profile of early career special educators' (n = 1,153) working conditions, induction support, and career plans using data from the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE). The majority of respondents are Caucasian and female, and 80% are certified for their main assignments. Most respondents reported receiving informal support from other teachers and viewed this informal support as more valuable than other forms of support. Approximately 60% of respondents participated in formal mentoring, although one third did not find this support helpful. Those who reported higher levels of induction support reported greater job manageability and success in getting through to difficult students. School climate was related to teachers' intent to remain in special education.*

Careful attention to the working conditions and the induction of early career special educators is needed if we are to build a committed and qualified teaching force. Recent reports have documented increasing special education teacher shortages and high attrition rates (McLeskey, Tyler, & Saunders, 2002), as well as a high proportion of uncertified beginning special educators entering teaching (Billingsley, 2002a). Although many certified beginning teachers leave, a higher percentage of these uncertified teachers leave (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Singer, 1992). This suggests the need to focus attention on re-

tion, particularly during the early years. As Ingersoll (2001) suggests, the teacher shortage will not be solved by recruiting thousands of new people into teaching if they leave after a few short years.

Various reasons have been posited about the high rates of attrition among beginning teachers, including personal reasons (e.g., child-rearing), other opportunities, and dissatisfaction with teaching. Grissmer and Kirby (1987) suggest that younger teachers have fewer debts and are less invested in their work and the community, which makes it easier to depart. Others suggest that many beginners leave because of the frustrations and initial difficulties that they experience

(Grissmer & Kirby; Singer). In a review of literature on attrition, mentoring, and induction, Gold (1996) reports that many teachers do not receive the intrinsic rewards of teaching that they expected early in their careers. This dissatisfaction leads to disillusionment, burnout, and finally, attrition.

Providing responsive support systems during the beginning years will not only reduce teacher attrition, but also help improve the quality of services that students receive. Murnane, Singer, and Willett (1989) suggest that teachers make marked gains in effectiveness during the first teaching years; therefore, "reducing the frequency with which children are taught by a successive stream of novice teachers" (p. 343) is important to improving educational quality.

#### **BEGINNING TEACHERS AND INDUCTION SUPPORT**

Understanding what beginning teachers experience is important to creating environments in which they can be supported and nurtured. A large body of literature spanning several decades addresses the needs and experiences of beginning general educators (Fuller, 1969; Gold, 1996; Weinstein, 1988). Beginning teachers experience a "survival" stage, in which they focus on being liked by students, being in control of the classroom, and being evaluated (Fuller). These teachers often underestimate the time that teaching tasks require, overestimate their abilities (Weinstein), and hold unrealistic expectations (Gold). Beginning teachers also struggle with a range of issues, such as problems with student behavior and discipline, difficulty working with parents, insufficient support, and apathy from colleagues (Gold; Veenman, 1984).

Although the beginning teaching years are often difficult, these teachers are often given the most challenging assignments and the least desirable courses and classrooms (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). The challenges of the first teaching years, coupled with difficult assignments and inadequate supports, contribute to high levels of teacher attrition and migration in the beginning years (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Gold, 1996; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Odell & Ferraro, 1992).

Induction programs are built around the premise that regardless of how well teachers are prepared, beginning teachers need support to learn to teach. Goals for induction programs should go beyond short-term support to help new teachers survive during the first year (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). Induction support should be multifaceted and involve a range of goals, including (a) facilitating teacher learning, growth, and student achievement; (b) reducing the stress that many beginning teachers experience; and (c) improving retention (Feiman-Nemser; Gold, 1996). Beginning teachers who are given reasonable assignments, receive helpful feedback, and are provided with personal support are more likely to acquire the skills needed for a satisfying teaching career and to develop greater commitment to teaching (Yee, 1990).

Taking time to support and cultivate beginning special educators is a critical leadership activity and requires systematic efforts. Gold (1996) outlines two major categories of assistance, *psychological support* and *instruction-related support*. Psychological support is essential because it helps beginning teachers develop confidence, handle stress, and become more self-reliant. However, psychological support is not enough; instruction-related support is needed to help teachers develop the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Gold).

Induction support can take many different forms, including working closely with a mentor, orientation and new teacher meetings, informal contacts with other teachers, written materials, observations, and professional development activities (Gold, 1996). Regardless of the form, induction support must be flexible and responsive to the needs of teachers and the particular contexts in which they work.

#### **SPECIAL EDUCATORS' BEGINNING YEARS**

Knowledge about the needs and experiences of beginning general educators has a substantial literature base spanning several decades; however, the experiences and induction support of beginning special educators has received attention only recently (e.g., Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Boyer & Lee, 2001; Carter & Scruggs, 2001; Ch-

ney, Krajewski, & Combs, 1992; Kilgore & Griffin, 1998; MacDonald, 2001; Mastropieri, 2001; Whitaker, 2000). With the exception of Whitaker, most of the published studies on beginning special educators rely on case studies (Boyer & Lee; MacDonald) or qualitative studies involving several teachers (e.g., Billingsley & Tomchin; Cheney, et al., & Combs; Kilgore & Griffin). However, although these qualitative studies collectively involved only a small number of beginning special educators, they show considerable consistency in the kinds of challenges that these teachers experience. These include problems with curriculum and instructional issues, work conditions, ambiguous roles, finding materials, addressing students' problem behaviors, time and organizational issues, collaboration, stress, and instructional management concerns (for a recent review, see Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2002).

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Induction support is promoted as a way to help beginning special educators become successful in their work with children and colleagues and as a method of increasing teacher retention (Boyer & Lee, 2001; White & Mason, 2001). It is important to consider that many beginning special educators have had minimal preparation (Billingsley, 2002a), and these teachers may need more extensive assistance during the early career period (Mastropieri, 2001).

Although there is considerable discourse about the importance of mentors and induction support for special educators (Billingsley, 2002a; Boyer & Lee, 2001), little is known about the effects of induction support in special education. Whitaker (2000) investigated the perceptions of 156 first-year special educators in South Carolina and examined the impact of induction support programs on special educators' plans to remain in

teaching. Whitaker found that the perceived effectiveness of mentoring was significantly correlated with special educators' plans to remain in teaching as well as their job satisfaction. Whitaker also reported that beginning special educators needed other special educators as their mentors, even if the special educator worked in a different school. Moreover, Whitaker found that formal meetings and observations were less effective than more informal, unscheduled contact between mentors and beginning special education teachers.

Although researchers emphasize the importance of positive working conditions and support systems for beginning special educators (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Griffin et al., 2002), no large-scale published studies were found that addressed beginning special educators' perceptions of work conditions, the supports they receive, or the effects of these supports. Knowledge about current working conditions and supports are important not only to improve workplace conditions for this likely-to-leave group of teachers, but also to identify problems and issues that might be addressed by policymakers, administrators, and teacher educators. To address this gap in the literature, the present study addresses the following questions:

- What are the working conditions of early career special educators?
- What types of induction are provided?
- Who provides beginning teachers with suggestions for enhancing their teaching?
- Are workplace conditions significantly related to teachers' intent to stay in teaching?
- Is induction support significantly related to beginning special educators' ratings of their effectiveness, job manageability, and plans to remain in teaching?

## METHOD

The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE), funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), was designed to describe the qual-

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ity of personnel serving students with disabilities and factors associated with workforce quality. It included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of local administrators (358) and service providers (8,061), including elementary and secondary special and general education teachers, preschool special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and special education paraprofessionals. This article includes results only for beginning special education teachers (preschool through secondary school) who had 5 or fewer years of teaching experience. Beginning special education teachers represented 21% of all special education teacher respondents in this study.

#### *SAMPLING*

SPeNSE used a two-phase sample design. In the first phase, the sampling units were local education agencies (LEAs), intermediate education units (IEUs), and state schools for students with visual or hearing impairments. Samples of LEAs and IEUs were selected from the Quality Education Data (QED), a database containing basic descriptive information on education agencies across the country. The sample of LEAs was stratified by geographic region and district size (i.e., total student enrollment). IEUs that did not employ staff who provide direct services to students with disabilities were deleted from the sampling frame, and then the IEU sample was stratified by geographic region. All state schools (76) were included in the first-phase sample.

The second phase was a stratified simple random sample of service providers (preschool teachers, teachers of students with visual and hearing impairments, teachers of students with emotional disturbance, other special education

teachers, speech-language pathologists, special education paraprofessionals, and general education teachers) from rosters of personnel that were obtained from 370 participating LEAs, IEUs, and state schools.

#### *SURVEY DEVELOPMENT*

SPeNSE relied on two primary data collection instruments: (a) a survey of local special education administrators and (b) a survey of service providers. Data collection used computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATIs) that were conducted in 2000. The instruments were developed to describe the workforce and factors affecting workforce quality. To the extent possible, individual items were taken from previously used instruments (primarily the Schools and Staffing Surveys) so extant data would be available for comparisons. The instruments were developed in consultation with a stakeholder group. A final draft was pilot tested in the fall of 1999 with three administrators and eight service providers, revised based on the results of the pilot test, and cleared by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

Demographic variables were measured by the use of single questions. Constructs such as early career support required measures containing multiple items. The SPeNSE questionnaires are available at [www.spense.org](http://www.spense.org).

#### *WEIGHTING AND ITEM NONRESPONSE*

SPeNSE data were weighted to generate national estimates. The weighting was done in phases, reflecting the two-phase sample design. The weighting for the first-phase sampling units was based on the recruitment results, with minor adjustments. First, the recruited respondents were weighted by adjusting the base weights (inverse selection probability) for recruitment nonrespondents. After analyzing the response pattern using Chi-squared Automatic Interaction Detection (CHAID) analysis, first-phase nonresponse adjustment weighting was conducted within each of the 36 design strata (24 district-size-region cells in the LEA sample and six regions in each of the IEU and state school samples). After careful non-response weight adjustment, the weights for the LEA and IEU samples were further adjusted by

**TABLE 1***Number of Eligible Teachers Sampled and Response Rates, by Type of Teacher*

<i>Type of Teacher</i>	<i>Sample Size<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Response Rate</i>	
		<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Special education teachers who serve primarily children with disabilities ages 3-5	1,249	881	70.5
Special education teachers who serve primarily students with visual or hearing impairments	1,906	1,054	55.3
Special education teachers who serve primarily students with emotional disturbance	1,247	859	68.9
Special education teachers who are not included in the previous three categories	3,711	2,633	71.0

<sup>a</sup>Excludes those sampled individuals who were found ineligible in the verification process or the screening portion of the interview, as well as individuals who died or became incapacitated between the time the sampling frame was developed and the data collection period.

poststratification weighting using teacher population data for the poststrata from the QED.

The service provider base weight, which was the multiple of the first-phase weight and the second-phase sampling weight, was adjusted to compensate for nonresponding teachers within each job assignment. CHAID analysis was performed to construct weighting cells for the weighting adjustment using design variables (region and district size) and some auxiliary variables from the QED. In the administrator survey data, imputation was done for item nonresponses for almost all variables that were used in the analysis. For the teacher data, no imputation was used because item nonresponse was very low.

#### DATA ANALYSES

Table 1 shows the total number of eligible teachers sampled and the number and percentage of respondents, by type of teacher. In this analysis, we included only special educators (not paraprofessionals, speech-language pathologists, or general educators) with 5 or fewer years of teaching experience ( $n = 1,153$ ).

Data analyses were conducted in WesVar, a statistical package designed to calculate estimates and variance estimates for data collected through complex sample designs. These analyses included descriptive statistics, chi-squares,  $t$  tests, and analyses of variance (ANOVAs, with post hoc

comparisons as needed). Results presented in this report were weighted to produce national estimates.

#### LIMITATIONS

Only 46% (372) of sampled LEAs, IEUs, and state schools and 69% (8,061) of sampled service providers participated in the study. Therefore, the overall response rate was only 32%. Weight adjustments were carefully done to address nonresponse bias, but care should be taken in interpreting results. Post hoc comparisons of SPeNSE data with other data sources containing identical or similarly worded items did not suggest any systematic nonresponse bias.

#### RESULTS

This section provides results from the analyses, including characteristics of early career teachers, their working conditions, and the early career supports they received. (Please note: Because the SPeNSE data were weighted to generate national estimates, percentages cannot be calculated by simply dividing unweighted frequencies by the sample size.)

##### DESCRIPTION OF EARLY CAREER TEACHERS

The respondents ( $n = 1,153$ ) had a mean of 2.8 years of experience teaching special education

(range 0 to 5 years). Eighty-two percent ( $n = 935$ ) of beginning special educators were female. Eighty-six percent ( $n = 928$ ) were Caucasian, 12% ( $n = 106$ ) were African American, and the remaining teachers were from other racial groups. The average age of the respondents was 33 years, and the median age was 29 (age range was 23 to 66). Approximately 11% ( $n = 130$ ) of these teachers reported having a disability. At the time of the interview, 80% ( $n = 890$ ) of the teachers were fully certified for their main assignment. However, 14% ( $n = 151$ ) had emergency certificates, 4% ( $n = 47$ ) were certified out of field, and 2% ( $n = 27$ ) did not have any teaching certificate. Thirty-two percent of these teachers held a master's degree.

#### WORKING CONDITIONS

A range of variables were included to assess the working conditions of special educators, including the type of district in which they accepted positions and their salaries, caseload characteristics, job manageability, and school climate. Approximately 50% ( $n = 493$ ) of beginning special educators worked in suburban areas, 27.5% ( $n = 440$ ) worked in urban districts, and 21.5% ( $n = 198$ ) worked in rural settings. The majority (80%) did not relocate to accept their teaching positions.

Salary information was gathered from district administrators and only data for first-year teachers were available. Salaries in 2000 for beginning teachers with a bachelor's degree and no experience varied considerably from district to district, in part as a function of differences in cost of living. The mean salary for first-year teachers with a bachelor's degree ( $n = 358$ ) was \$25,749 (median = \$25,598; range = \$14,748 to \$38,995). The mean salary for first-year teachers with a master's degree ( $n = 358$ ) was \$28,442 (median \$27,781; range = \$16,024 to \$42,977).

These early career teachers taught a mean of 22.8 students (median = 15.7; range = 3 to 300). Their caseloads were highly diverse. Thirty-three percent ( $n = 305$ ) served students from four or more disability groups, 44% ( $n = 464$ ) served students from two or three disability groups, and 23% ( $n = 374$ ) served students from a single disability group. Moreover, 64.3% ( $n = 775$ ) of beginning special educators served students from cultural or linguistic groups that were different

from their own, and 32.7% ( $n = 380$ ) served students who were limited English proficient.

School climate was assessed by asking teachers to rate (on a 1 to 4 scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 4 = great extent) a range of items including administrator and colleague support, the availability of materials, and feeling included in the school (see Table 2 for responses to specific scale items). The reliability coefficient for the composite scale was .91. Results suggest that overall, early career teachers viewed their school climate favorably. The mean response to most of the items making up this scale was above 3.2. The highest climate ratings were given to "the school is a safe place for students" ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ); "you really like the school in which you are currently working" ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ); and "the special education contact understands what you do" ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ). The lowest rating was given to "necessary materials are available when you need them" ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ), with almost a third of the teachers indicating "not at all" or "to a small extent" to this item. Another rating of concern was in the area of the "principal understands what you do" ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ), with 24% of teacher respondents indicating "not at all" or "to a small extent." Finally, 21% indicated low ratings to "you feel included in what goes on in this school" ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ).

"Job manageability" was assessed by the following question: "Thinking about your total job, including your professional responsibilities, to what extent do you agree that your workload is manageable?" (response scale of 1 = not at all to 4 = great extent). More than one fourth of beginning special education teachers (28.8%,  $n = 283$ ) reported that their workload was not at all manageable or was manageable to "a small extent." "Paperwork/duties interfere with teaching" was assessed by asking "To what extent do you agree that routine duties and paperwork interfere with your job of teaching?" (response scale of 1 = not at all to 4 = great extent). The majority of beginning teachers (76.1%,  $n = 872$ ) indicated that routine duties and paperwork interfered to a moderate or great extent.

ANOVAs were used to investigate whether respondents' career plans differed by salary, number of students on a caseload, diversity of caseload, or school climate. In each analysis, the

**TABLE 2**  
*Beginning Special Educators' Perception of School Climate (N = 1,153)*

<i>School Climate Item</i>	<i>M</i>		<i>SE</i>		<i>n</i>		<i>Not at all</i>		<i>Small Extent</i>		<i>Moderate Extent</i>		<i>Great Extent</i>	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
School administration is supportive	3.2	5.2	0.04	13.5	1,147	35.2	46.1							
Necessary materials are available	2.9	7.0	0.04	23.7	1,153	41.2	28.4							
Principal enforces school rules and backs you up	3.4	5.2	0.04	11.0	1,110	25.8	58.0							
Colleagues share your beliefs and values about school mission	3.4	1.6	0.03	7.9	1,137	40.5	50.0							
Principal knows and communicates what kind of school he/she wants	3.4	3.0	0.04	11.3	1,130	24.9	60.7							
Great deal of cooperative effort among staff	3.1	3.6	0.04	14.7	1,147	45.8	35.9							
Staff members are recognized for a job well done	3.1	5.6	0.04	19.8	1,147	37.7	36.9							
You make a conscious effort to coordinate the content of your courses with others	3.3	2.1	0.04	11.0	1,093	38.8	48.2							
Teachers participate in decision making on important matters	3.1	4.4	0.03	15.4	1,139	47.4	32.8							
Special education division supports you in interactions with parents	3.4	2.6	0.04	8.0	1,094	31.7	57.7							
Principal backs you up when you need it	3.4	4.6	0.04	10.5	1,129	28.5	56.4							
You can count on your principal or vice principal to assist with behavior	3.4	4.9	0.04	12.6	1,115	25.0	57.5							
The special education division backs you up when you need it	3.3	3.8	0.04	9.4	1,086	36.0	50.8							
You really like the school in which you are currently working	3.6	2.7	0.03	4.7	1,150	25.0	67.7							

TABLE 2 (Continued)

You feel included in what goes on in this school	3.1	0.04	1,149	4.7	16.7	39.5	39.1
Your principal understands what you do	3.1	0.05	1,135	8.2	15.9	33.7	42.3
The special education contact understands what you do	3.5	0.04	1,050	3.5	5.7	30.2	60.7
The school is a safe place for students	3.7	0.02	1,151	1.2	2.3	24.9	71.8

dependent variable was intent to stay in teaching. Salary was not related to intent to remain in teaching for beginning special educators with a bachelor's degree,  $F(2,220) = 0.02$ ,  $p = 0.98$  or with a master's degree,  $F(2,220) = 0.31$ ,  $p = 0.74$ ; nor was caseload size,  $F(2,220) = 2.75$ ,  $p = 0.07$  or caseload diversity,  $F(2,220) = 1.35$ ,  $p = 0.26$ . However, respondents who planned to remain in teaching until retirement had significantly higher school climate scores ( $M = 79.7$ ,  $SE = 1.14$ ) than did teachers who were undecided or would remain until something better came along ( $M = 75.1$ ,  $SE = 1.46$ ), or who planned on leaving the profession as soon as possible ( $M = 69.2$ ,  $SE = 3.80$ ),  $F(2,220) = 4.32$ ,  $p = 0.01$ . Follow-up analyses indicated that beginning special education teachers who planned to remain in the profession until retirement had significantly higher school climate scores than did beginning teachers who were undecided  $F(2,221) = 4.78$ ,  $p = 0.03$  or who were leaving the profession as soon as possible  $F(2,221) = 6.188$ ,  $p = 0.01$ .

#### EARLY CAREER SUPPORTS

Early career support was assessed by asking teachers to rate (on a 1 to 4 scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 4 = great extent) the extent to which they received specific types of early career supports in their first 3 years of teaching as well as the helpfulness of these supports (see Table 3 for specific scale items). The reliability coefficient for the composite scale was .73. The most frequently provided forms of support were "informal assistance from other colleagues" and "inservice staff development," with more than 90% of beginning teachers indicating that they received these supports. More than half (61%,  $n = 693$ ) of beginning special educators had formal mentoring programs available to them. Availability of support from building-level administrators and supervisors was reported by 86.1% ( $n = 960$ ) and 75.3% ( $n = 876$ ), respectively.

In considering the *helpfulness* of support, 89% ( $n = 963$ ) indicated that "informal help from other colleagues" was helpful to a moderate or great extent. The lowest ratings were for formal mentoring (66% rated it helpful to a moderate or great extent,  $n = 464$ ) and meetings with new teachers (63% rated them helpful to a moderate or great extent,  $n = 346$ ).

Table 4 summarizes beginning special education teachers' responses to questions about individuals (e.g., principal, department chair, teachers, and/or district-level supervisors) who provided suggestions for enhancing their teaching. Again, teachers indicated that "other special educators" ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ) and "department chairs" ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ) were most likely to provide such support, with 77% of special educators indicating that "other special educators" provided suggestions for enhancing teaching to a moderate or great extent. Fewer principals ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ), other school-level administrators ( $M = 2.5$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ), and district-level consultants/supervisors ( $M = 2.5$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ) provided suggestions for enhancing teaching.

Approximately half of beginning special education teachers (51.8%,  $n = 598$ ) reported that they plan to stay until retirement or as long as possible, with 40.4% ( $n = 451$ ) indicating that they were "undecided" or would stay "until something else comes along." The remaining teachers (7.8%,  $n = 76$ ) plan to leave as soon as possible (See Table 5).

ANOVAs were used to assess whether overall early career support was related to three dependent variables: (a) job manageability, (b) overall effectiveness as a teacher, and (c) plans to remain in teaching. The variables of job manageability and plans to remain are described previously. Overall effectiveness was assessed by asking teachers to indicate "How would you characterize your overall performance as a teacher?" with a Likert scale from 1 = poor to 4 = exceptional. Beginning special educators who reported receiving moderate ( $M = 56.8$ ,  $SE = 1.4$ ) or high levels ( $M = 55.1$ ,  $SE = 2.2$ ) of induction support were more likely than those who received lower levels of support ( $M = 49.3$ ,  $SE = 1.5$ ) to see their jobs as manageable,  $F(2,220) = 3.64$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . However, early career support was not significantly related to beginning special educators' overall perceptions of their effectiveness as a teacher  $F(2, 220) = 0.90$ ,  $p = 0.44$ , or to their intent to remain in teaching  $F(2,220) = 2.54$ ,  $p = 0.08$ .

We used a *t* test to investigate whether support was related to success in "getting through to the most difficult students" (response scale of 1 = not at all to 4 = great extent). We collapsed this latter variable to create sufficient cell sizes for

**TABLE 3**  
*Assistance Provided and Extent to Which Assistance Was Helpful (N = 1,153)*

<i>Type of assistance</i>	<i>Support Available</i>				<i>Extent to Which Support Was Helpful</i>							
	<i>Yes</i>		<i>No</i>		<i>Not at all</i>		<i>To a Small Extent</i>		<i>To a Moderate Extent</i>		<i>To a Great Extent</i>	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Formal mentoring	61.3	38.7	13.5	20.5	27.7	38.3	26.1	37.1	36.4	40.6	39.5	34.8
Regular meetings with other new teachers	49.0	51.0	8.4	28.5	12.5	50.0	30.1	30.1	34.8	23.4	54.4	
Informal help from building teachers	87.2	12.8	1.1	12.5	27.1	30.1	34.8	23.4	54.4			
Assistance from building administrators	86.1	13.9	2.2	27.1	24.1	34.8	23.4	54.4				
Assistance from consultants or supervisors	75.3	24.7	1.6	24.1	28.9	23.4	54.4					
Inservice or staff development	90.2	9.8	1.9	28.9	10.4	34.7	54.4					
Informal help from other colleagues	95.9	4.1	0.5	10.4	34.7	54.4						

**TABLE 4***Extent to Which Staff Provide Beginning Educators With Suggestions for Enhancing Teaching*

Staff Position	M	SE	n	Not at all	Small Extent	Moderate Extent	Great Extent
	#	#	#	%	%	%	%
Principal or department head	2.7	0.04	1128	13.2	27.6	31.2	28.0
Department chair	3.1	0.06	959	10.3	16.7	29.5	43.5
Other school-level administrators	2.5	0.05	1064	19.3	27.3	36.1	17.4
(Other) Special education teachers	3.2	0.04	1138	6.6	16.5	31.7	45.3
Other teachers	2.5	0.05	1037	17	30.7	36.8	15.5
District-level consultants/supervisors	2.5	0.05	1080	19.8	29.8	35.8	14.6

comparison. Respondents who reported high or moderately high levels of support ( $M = 55.0$ ,  $SE = 1.1$ ) were more likely than those who reported lower levels of support to indicate that they could get through to even the most difficult students ( $M = 50.1$ ,  $SE = 2.2$ ) ( $t(1109) = 2.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

#### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This study provides for the first time, a description of the characteristics of a national sample of beginning special educators and their perceptions of working conditions and induction support. In summary, the typical early career teacher is a Caucasian, 29-year-old woman working in a suburban school district. She holds a bachelor's degree and is certified for her position. She teaches approximately 16 students, including students from cultural or linguistic groups different from her own. Three different primary disabilities are represented on her caseload. She reports a favorable school climate but finds that routine duties and paperwork interfere with her teaching. Informal assistance from other colleagues is the type of induction support that she is likely to receive and find helpful.

This profile suggests that special education teachers entering the field continue to be overwhelmingly Caucasian and female, although the demographic profile of children looks increasingly

diverse (Smith-Davis & Billingsley, 1993; Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Saunders, 2002). These early career teachers look remarkably similar to the larger population of special education teachers of which approximately 86% are Caucasian and 85% are female (Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, & Willig, 2002). Tyler et al. suggests that the number of teachers from culturally and/or linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds will continue to decline unless we devise more effective efforts to recruit and retain students of color in the teaching profession.

#### WORKING CONDITIONS

It is encouraging that the majority of early career teachers gave fairly high ratings to overall school climate. However, an analysis of some of the individual items suggests that particular work factors are problems for teachers (e.g., limited access to necessary materials, difficulty in managing their jobs, paperwork that interferes with teaching,

*Beginning teachers are more likely to receive informal support from colleagues more often than other forms of support and are more likely to find this support helpful.*

**TABLE 5***Beginning Teachers' Intent to Remain in Teaching (Response Frequencies and Percentages)*

<i>Response Option</i>	<i>Teachers With 5 or Fewer Years Experience</i>	
	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>
As long as able	37.2	448
Until retirement	14.6	150
Until something else comes along	12.5	142
Leaving as soon as possible	7.8	76
Undecided	27.9	309

feelings of not being included in their schools, and having principals who do not understand what they do). Teachers who experience these types of problems in combination are particularly susceptible to stress and job dissatisfaction, which can lead to withdrawal and attrition (Billingsley, 2002b; Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995; Billingsley 2002b; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001).

The majority of these teachers serve students in three or more disability groups. It is likely that many of these teachers completed teacher preparation programs that were largely categorical, yet find themselves in teaching positions that are noncategorical or at least multicategorical. Mismatches between preservice preparation and actual working conditions likely contribute to the challenges of the first teaching years. Although a mismatch between preservice preparation and teaching requirements has been documented in previous interview studies, only a small sample of teachers were included (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Mastropieri, 2001; Morvant, Gersten, Gillman, Keating, & Blake, 1995). Therefore, the extent to which actual preparation matches beginning teachers' first jobs is a question for further research.

#### *INDUCTION SUPPORT*

It is encouraging to note that more than half of the beginning teachers (61%) had access to formal mentoring programs. Apparently, the availability of mentoring programs is growing, because only 23% of experienced teachers reported the

availability of formal mentoring during their early years of teaching (Billingsley, 2002a). Unfortunately, one third of early career teachers did not find formal mentoring helpful. Although we do not have any information about the content or intensity of the formal mentoring programs available to these beginning special education teachers, it is likely that many of them participated in programs for all teachers that were not tailored to their specific needs.

Beginning teachers are more likely to receive informal support from colleagues more often than other forms of support and are more likely to find this support helpful. We also found that other teachers provide early career special educators with feedback about how to improve their teaching more frequently than do central office administrators or principals. These findings emphasize the importance of colleague support and are consistent with earlier studies. For example, Whitaker (2000) reported that informal supports were viewed as more valuable to first-year teachers than formalized mechanisms. It is possible that informal supports are helpful because they allow for the emotional support that teachers value (Gold, 1996; Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross, 1994; Odell & Ferraro, 1992). Emotional support involves caring relationships, open communication, and taking an interest in the individual's work (House, 1981). Informal support may also be more contextualized and, thus, tailored to the specific issues and needs of the teacher.

Because beginning teachers are at risk of attrition in these early years, researchers have called for induction programs that serve to both retain

new teachers and foster teacher learning and growth (Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Gold, 1996). An encouraging finding is that teachers who described their induction program as helpful were more likely to find their job manageable and to indicate that they could get through to even the most difficult students. Teachers who believe they make a difference are more likely to find their work intrinsically rewarding and are, therefore, more likely to be satisfied and committed to teaching (Billingsley, 1993).

#### *INTENT TO STAY*

Approximately half of the beginning special education teachers plan to stay in teaching until retirement or for as long as possible. This suggests that the remaining half might be considered "at risk" of leaving special education teaching. This "at-risk" figure is not far from what Singer (1992) found in her longitudinal study of beginning special educators: that by the end of 5 years, 43% of newly hired special educators were no longer teaching.

Interestingly, neither the overall helpfulness of induction support nor the helpfulness of formal mentoring was significantly correlated with respondents' intention to stay in special education. This finding is contrary to Whitaker's study (2000) in South Carolina. She found a significant correlation between effectiveness of mentoring and intent to stay (although she states that the effect size was very small). However, it is important to note that the "intent" variable that Whitaker used is very different from the "intent" variable used in this study. Whitaker used multiple-choice items asking about intent to remain in the same position/similar position in the next school year and in 5 years. This study asked teachers how long they planned to teach (followed by five choices, including "until retirement"). Whitaker addresses a relatively short timeframe, whereas we considered a longer span of time. Both types of measures are appropriate, depending on the purposes of the study; however, it is logical to assume that short-term plans would have a stronger relationship to attrition than longer term plans (Billingsley, 2002b).

Attrition is influenced by many factors, notably working conditions and personal circumstances. Although mentoring may make the

difference between intent to stay and leave for some teachers, the benefits of mentoring may not be sufficient to offset very poor work conditions or pivotal personal circumstances (Billingsley, 2002b).

#### **IMPLICATIONS AND NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study has implications for policymakers, administrators, and teacher educators. First, school districts need to provide systematic and responsive induction programs for all beginning special educators. State education agencies can provide leadership by requiring such programs and making funding available. Partnerships between teacher preparation programs and districts also allow varied types of expertise needed in the support of beginning teachers (Karge, Lasky, McCabe, & Robb, 1995). Because approximately one third of the beginning teachers did not find formal mentoring programs helpful, care must be taken in the design and evaluation of these programs. White and Mason (2001) provide detailed guidelines about the development of mentoring programs in special education. These guidelines are available on the Council for Exceptional Children's Web site (<http://www.ccc.sped.org>).

*Because beginning teachers are at risk of attrition in these early years, researchers have called for induction programs that serve to both retain new teachers and to foster teacher learning and growth.*

Second, induction programs need to be flexible enough to consider the needs of beginning teachers and the context in which they work. Although previous research suggests typical areas of concern and need for beginning special educators (e.g., collaboration, addressing the needs of students with complex academic and behavioral challenges, finding needed materials, laws and regulations), each setting and teacher is different,

suggesting the importance of context and the need for individualized supports (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Griffin et al., 2002; Rosenberg, Griffin, Kilgore, & Carpenter, 1997). Moreover, given that 20% of the teachers in this study lacked full certification for their positions, more intensive supports are needed for those teachers who have insufficient preparation or for those whose preparation does not match the assignment. Because informal interactions among teachers are valued and are viewed as helpful by beginning teachers, administrators need to make the most of this form of support.

Third, working conditions for beginning special educators should be carefully designed to make sure these educators have access to necessary teaching materials and have reasonable caseloads and workloads. Because the majority of these early career teachers perceive that paperwork and nonteaching duties interfere with teaching, strategies for reducing the administrative burden on teachers is needed. Educational leaders also need to better understand what special educators do, and help them feel part of the school.

Finally, this study is based on teachers' perceptions at one point in time and includes only structured interviews. Descriptive research is needed to illuminate critical needs, problems, and issues from the perspectives of beginning teachers and their supporters. Observations, interviews, and extended engagement with beginning teachers, their mentors, and administrators are needed to help identify the specific supports and the work contexts that help to develop and sustain special educators' commitment and growth.

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