

# Sustaining and retaining beginning special educators: It takes a village

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## 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,

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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),

understanding legal requirements and system support related specifically to special education, having knowledge of curriculum and instruction in relationship to general education, adapting regular education curriculum, managing time and resources, and supervising paraprofessionals (Billingsley, 2002, 2004; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Boyer & Gillespie, 2000; Kilgore & Griffin, 1998; Mastropieri, 2001; Whitaker, 2003).

Beginning special education teachers experience demands specific to their discipline. However, exploration of the socialisation of special education teachers or induction programmes specific to special education teachers in the United States are surprisingly rare (Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2003; Puglach, 1992). In addition, little research exists that explores possible new or changing demands on beginning special education teachers related to policies such as standards based reform, graduation standards, inclusion of all students with special needs in general education curriculum, IDEA 2004, and NCLB. Therefore, this study sought more updated and detailed information from beginning special education teachers on their perceptions of effective support during their first year of teaching.

## 2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore a specific group of beginning special education teachers' perceptions of their induction experiences. A particular urban school district in the southwestern United States offered all its beginning teachers induction support in the form of: (1) an assigned, district level mentor on full-time release, (2) monthly seminars based on the state's nine teaching standards, and (3) a structured system of responsive journaling. Each mentor's responsibilities included: (1) providing both arranged and drop in visits designed for formative feedback and emotional support, (2) conducting monthly meetings with their group of 25–35 first year teachers, and (3) responding in either written form or in person to topics addressed in the teachers' journaling. The district's model of induction reflects what experts in the field continue to cite as elements of support that appear to influence teacher job satisfaction and commitment. Those elements included: (1) a mentor in the same teaching discipline, (2) mentors with release time from classroom teaching duties, (3) specific goals or structure for mentor/mentee inter-

actions, (4) formative, rather than evaluative feedback, (5) opportunities for new teachers to reflect on their practise, (6) opportunities for beginning teachers to interact with their peers, and (7) professional development related to improving their practise (Arends & Regazio-DiGilio, 2000; Fidelar & Haselkorn, 1999; Huling-Austin, 1992; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) because of the growing numbers of new special education teachers each year, this district began providing a district mentor with a background in special education for all beginning special education teachers. They met monthly as a group of special educators with the mentor and discussions included topics specific to their discipline, but within the parameters of the state teacher standards.

Given this context, the study's research questions included: Where did these particular beginning special education teachers seek information and support during their first year of teaching? Did they access the induction programme activities available to them? What did they perceive as the most useful avenues of support and information? Findings from the study were intended to provide objective feedback to this particular district as well as add to the body of literature on just what constitutes effective support for beginning special education teachers.

## 3. Procedures for the study

Information on the structure of this particular district's induction approach emerged from previous research with beginning special education teachers who taught in a variety of districts in the area (Gehrke & Murri, 2007). The district accepted the researcher's request to examine more closely the experiences of its first year special education teachers given that the district provided a rather 'customized' approach to induction. In this large district, 25 special education teachers were first year teachers. The research team chose to focus on teachers serving students with a high incidence disability (learning disabled (LD)) in a service delivery model currently common for students with mild academic difficulties, i.e. minimal pull-out and full participation in the general education curriculum. The rationale for selecting these participants took into consideration the current trend for increasingly inclusive educational practise and accountability for mildly handicapped learners. Twelve of the target district's 25 first year special education teachers taught students with LD. The

researchers also sought participants with similar grade level assignments in order to control for differences in elementary and secondary level educational settings. As such, the seven LD teachers placed in either self-contained or high school settings were not included in this study. The remaining five first year elementary LD resource special education teachers were asked to participate. These five individual constituted the purposive sample for the study.

Signed letters of informed consent were obtained from each informant prior to each interview held in February of the participants' first year of teaching. In the interviews, participants were asked to describe the types of instances in which they sought out information or support, where they found assistance, and what types of information they found helpful. They were encouraged to elaborate upon their answers and provide specific examples. Because district personnel had notified potential participants of the district's approval of the study, the interviewer made it very clear that their participation was voluntary, that confidentiality would be assured, and that the project was not a programme or teaching evaluation. Audio tapes were transcribed and data was coded and categorised as per the Miles and Huberman (1994) model of qualitative data analysis. In order to triangulate information from the informants, descriptions of the structure and content of induction programme activities were obtained from the district special education mentor. The district's website provided information on professional development opportunities and district requirements for beginning teachers. The state teacher standards were examined in order to clarify the focus of the monthly seminars. The researcher also observed one of the monthly seminars prior to the interviews and examined the materials used to structure the responsive journals.

### 3.1. Participants

Five first year special education teachers with similar teaching assignments participated in individual interviews. The purposive sample consisted of 4 females and 1 male who taught in elementary resource room settings for students with learning disabilities. Three of the participants (Mike, Lynne, and Jill) had entered Special Education as a second career and had recently obtained post baccalaureate certifications in Special Education. The remaining

two participants (Kelly and Lisa) were mid-way through their first year of teaching as a first career. The three participants with post-bac certifications all received them via the same on-line community college programme. That programme offered a combination of online coursework, site-based practicums, and a 9-week student teaching experience. All five participants received cross-categorical Special Education certification and all colleges were located in the immediate urban area. The elementary schools in which they taught were in the same district, of similar size, but in a variety of neighbourhoods (see Table 1).

## 4. Findings from the study

During analysis of the data, our title metaphor emerged. The African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child", seemed very appropriate as the beginning teachers talked about their attempts to become effective teachers by accessing a network of resources in their school environments. Consistent themes emerged related to: (1) the broad range of the beginning teachers' sources of information and support, (2) who or what provided their most valued information and support, and (3) the participants' interactions with persons and activities in each of their schools that at times appeared to compound their frustrations.

### 4.1. Sources of support and information

As in previous research, beginning special education teachers described a variety of information or support resources (Kilgore, Griffin, Otis-Willborn, & Winn, 2003; Winn, Otis-Willborn, Griffin, & Kilgore, 2004). Mike reported using "...three or four different avenues [for information]" as did Jill, who would "... talk to my teammates... talk to my mentor... send an email to this other teacher..." when she needed assistance. When Kelly described her need to acquire instructional materials, she voiced, "Well, I kind of came in with my own.... They gave me a bunch to start out with.... Then I've been pulling from stuff that's been left in the classroom and things that other teachers around me have had."

The study's findings also supported previous work which found that the most commonly named source of information and support for beginning special education teachers was another special educator (Whitaker, 2000, 2003). For teachers in

this district, however, that resource included both the district assigned mentor as well as veteran special education teachers in their buildings. Contacts with the mentor provided Kelly with strategies for solving difficulties with another teacher in the building. For Mike, the assigned mentor arranged for release time to observe another classroom as well as provided positive encouragement about balancing work and life outside school. The district mentor provided Jill with "...things [related to behaviour management] that I know she sent me specifically because she knows that just what I needed." The mentor was also a valuable source of information related to special education paperwork and instructional materials for four of the five first year special education teachers interviewed.

Despite having an assigned mentor familiar with the field of special education, the first year teachers also relied on the special education teachers at their own sites, or 'villages', for information and support. Jill summed up the feelings of the others when she voiced that resource teachers in her building, "...helped me and basically walked me through the process [of writing IEPs]." Others felt similarly to Mike who added that, "...in a majority of the cases, just getting the information here [in the building] has been easier. You can walk across the hall or run into someone at the copy machine."

#### 4.1.1. *A broader network of resources*

New information related to supporting first year special education teachers emerged from the informants. In each case, their support networks included more than just the assigned special education mentor and other licensed special education teachers in their building. The study's first year teachers relied on reading specialists, school psychologists, other special educators in the district, and a former university instructor.

From the reading specialist in their buildings, both Lynne and Mike received information on individual student ability levels. "She [the reading specialist] has been the most support to me, because as a rule, my students were her previous students... She has a lot of information on the needs of my students based on her experiences with them," said Lynne. In Mike's school, the process was similar for intervening early in students' academic careers:

You go to [grade level] meetings and discuss every kid in every class that's having a problem.... We're getting data from the reading specia-

list about all her assessments, so I pretty much know who's struggling... which kids aren't where they're supposed to be.

Jill shared that the reading specialist in her building was a "wonderful resource" for ideas, materials, and cues that improved reading comprehension instruction for her fifth grade students.

A licensed school psychologist is always an integral part of the child identification and special education student assessment process. However, four of the five teachers in this study viewed the school psychologist in their building as a key source of information on special education policies and procedures. Kelly, Lisa, and Mike all reported relying on their building school psychologist along with their mentor and other special education teachers for guidance in preparing IEP paperwork. Lynne, too, had a productive working relationship with the school psychologist in her school. She expressed, "I don't necessarily agree with all her [school psychologist] placements, but.... she's good in that I can bounce things off her." For instance, Lynne received information for further evaluation of individual student strengths and weaknesses from the school psychologist.

Other individuals provided this particular group of special education teachers with emotional support and instructional information. For Kelly, a former professor from the small, private university where she received her degree offered supportive advice. Jill, who began her job mid-year, maintained a relationship with the special education teacher whose classroom she had observed as she prepared for her first teaching assignment.

When I first signed my contract, I wanted to get as much information as possible.... The Director gave me the name of one of her veteran teachers. I contacted the teacher and she was more than happy to accommodate me. She still is.

From this person and another fellow special educator in the district, Jill received information and materials related to classroom management, instruction, and assessment.

#### 4.1.2. *The resourcefulness of self*

This last quote from Jill was indicative of some perhaps critical new information that emerged from the study. In existing studies of beginning special education teachers, few researchers focused on the relationship of the beginning teachers' own

resourcefulness, i.e. their ability to seek out solutions to their problems, to a successful first year of teaching. Perhaps unknowingly, each participant in this study provided examples of taking the initiative and using their own creativity to tackle the variety of problems related to acquiring appropriate materials and following special education procedures accurately in each of their settings.

For example, in addition to seeking out appropriate settings for classroom observations, Jill accessed the Internet for instructional materials, borrowed curriculum and materials from the general education setting, and signed up for relevant district professional development opportunities. Despite having had experience as a para-educator in a special education setting, Lynne, as do many beginning special education teachers, struggled with what to teach. “That’s been my biggest challenge. There isn’t really any curriculum for special ed. It’s kind of like, ‘you’re hired’ ... they give you this room and they shut the door,” she relayed. In response to such a lack of information, Lynne, Jill, and Lisa all reported using paperwork in their files to prepare IEPs and instructional materials. They each also spent time outside of the school day going over the state standards for general education in order to match curriculum, instruction, and IEP goals and objectives with grade level expectations and the abilities of their students.

Informants also related an ability to reflect on their practise. Examples of their insights included:

I lie awake at night sometimes and ask myself, “What should I have done?” or “What can I do?” ... a lot of times I’ll figure things out on my own. Lisa

Sometimes I just need to reflect. I need to step away from it and see what I need to do. Jill

I really want to improve my instruction...I’m learning as I go and I think that I could be a little better...I think I could improve. Kelly

Each spent time and energy outside the school day preparing materials and evaluating student as well as their own progress.

#### 4.2. Valued information and support

As with all beginning teachers, this study’s participants expressed appreciation for the emotional support they received. They described receiving valuable emotional support from the district mentor, special education colleagues in their build-

ing, family, friends, or their spiritual beliefs and convictions. The participants also confirmed that, just as in existing research, they needed information and assistance with items specific to the traditional responsibilities of a special educator. They felt inadequately prepared for the complexities of identifying individual student needs, producing an IEP that conformed to policy, and providing the appropriate level and type of special education services. To assist them with tasks related to special education procedures, they consistently relied on an experienced network of professionals who were familiar with the special education process.

##### 4.2.1. A focus on problems of practise

However, analysis of the data revealed that the categories in which these teachers often sought and valued assistance were areas directly related to effective teaching. Many of those who have studied the professional growth of first year teachers write that the ability of first year teachers to focus on student learning emerges only after beginning teachers have moved beyond mere survival and their concern for others’ perceptions of them as teachers (Huling-Austin, 1992; Kagan, 1992; Moir, 1999). However, the participants in our study, who were beginning only their second semester of teaching, indicated in very specific ways that their focus was on effective teaching practises and improved student outcomes. Four of the five first year teachers had taken advantage of the opportunity to receive training related to Reading and Language instruction. For Lisa, that training provided “...the foundation for what I do with my students.” Kelly’s words seemed to reflect the perceptions of the others when she discussed the need to acquire materials and instructional techniques appropriate for her students,

There’s been different areas that I wanted to increase in and so I’ve used the district [offerings]. For example, I just went to their Language training. I really like it and I can see how it would work with most students.

Jill described being able to supplement materials and modify her instructional approaches based on district professional development offerings. In addition, both Lynne and Mike had taken advantage of classes offered by a district master teacher who offered workshops on effective teaching techniques. Jill intended on taking advantage of multi-sensory grammar training, as she felt that the

approach would be effective for her upper-grade level students.

The beginning teachers were also very aware of the need to maintain high expectations for their students. They held their students accountable in both the resource room and the general education settings. Lisa described, "...I think our goal is to get them out of special ed if they can.....a lot of my kids use their disability as a crutch...and I'll say, 'I know you can do this...'" When a general education teacher commented to Lynne that a particular student was not able to complete their social studies assignments, Lynne replied, "Oh yes, he can. Don't let him just sit there." Neither did Lynne's expectations waiver when students' themselves demonstrated behaviours common to many special education students, e.g. learned helplessness or teacher dependence.

### 4.3. *Encountering obstacles in the village*

During the course of each interview, the researcher sought to maintain a focus on the research questions, i.e. the teachers' perceptions of effective support. However, the new teachers appeared to encounter some common obstacles. A body of research suggests that a positive work environment and the availability of induction support activities are factors that may influence teacher retention (Johnson, 2004; Johnson et al., 2001; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). The beginning teachers in this study had varying perceptions as to the value of the support and information garnered from particular activities and persons in their settings. Those resources included: the district orientation meetings at the beginning of the school year, the monthly seminars for first year special education teachers, and their relationships with general education teachers and principals in their buildings.

#### 4.3.1. *District orientation*

Four participants reflected on the beginning of the year district orientation meetings, and all did so negatively. Both Kelly and Lisa voiced that it was an "information overload" and that the information that they found relevant could have been presented in a shorter amount of time. Stronger words came from Lynne, who referred to those days as "a waste of my time for a week...I'd like to know more about models [of instruction] that I think would really benefit my kids." Mike also perceived that being required to attend all of the

orientation meetings placed undue demands on his time as he prepared materials for the wide variety of students on his caseload. In contrast, as previously reported, the participants most valued professional development and learning opportunities that directly related to improving their practise or to special education procedures.

#### 4.3.2. *Monthly new teacher seminars*

The participants made few references to the monthly meetings where first year special education teachers met as a group. For those that did comment, they reported receiving useful teaching tips and information specific to them as special educators, even though, as one participant added, "I'm not going to lie to you, there's a whole lot of months that come along that I wish I didn't have to go!" Lisa, however, captured the essence of the potential positives of such meetings when she shared, "I think it was nice to share in the frustrations with other special education teachers because this job is so hard...to go into another room where everyone understands how you feel, that's really encouraging."

#### 4.3.3. *Professional relationships*

Interactions with colleagues within each school building, or 'village', help shape the professional culture of that school (Birkeland & Johnson, 2002). From the interviews, information about relationships with general education teachers and building principals emerged. The special education teachers in this study maintained connexions with general educators in terms of accessing curriculum and monitoring student progress in general education settings. However, four of the five first year teachers in this study described less than harmonious interactions with general educators in their workplace settings. Lynne, at times, felt that some general education teachers resisted 'taking ownership' of special education students and were not always willing to make instructional adjustments in their classrooms. She, along with Lisa and Jill, spoke about instances where general education teachers in their buildings did not appear to understand the role and responsibilities of a resource room special education teacher. "I don't think anyone understands that I have [student academic] goals and objectives that I have to meet," related Lynne as she described students being sent to her room to complete assigned projects. Lynne also related an incident when she sought information from her school principal concerning

standardised testing for her students, but, subsequently left the meeting thinking, "...well, you were no help at all!". Lynne also referred to discord between the lower elementary grades and the upper elementary grades in her building, discord that at times affected her relationship with the special education teacher at the upper level.

Likewise, Lisa struggled with establishing productive relationships with individuals in her building,

...It's been tough because I feel like I kind of get the cold shoulder, like I'm not involved with them enough....but they [general education teachers] have no idea that I don't just teach. I test. I write....There's all kinds of stuff in this job that they don't have to do....I wish they [general education teachers] had more understanding or more patience for the kids and for me, especially being a new teacher.

Like Lynne, Lisa described a situation where she was compelled to defend her curriculum decisions to her principal and felt that, "...a little more faith in me would have been appreciated".

Both Kelly and Jill, new teachers filling existing positions, also experienced "resistance" in collaborating and communicating with general education teachers. Jill recognised that she was "different than the former teacher" who was more "laid back and I'm more structured in my learning and direct instruction teaching." Kelly described it as a "struggle" to approach general education teachers with proposed changes to a program that had "been a set way for many years." Although Jill perceived positive changes in the relationship between general and special education, she commented that the general education teachers in her building at times had unrealistic expectations for her students, did not readily modify assignments, and were "still learning how to teach students that are learning disabled in the content areas."

Mike was the sole participant in the study who was able to describe a more harmonious atmosphere that,

...is promoting small learning communities....Every other week I meet with the second grade teachers. We get substitutes and we meet for half a day. You go to these meetings and you discuss every kid in every class in second grade that's having a problem.

Mike's comments were atypical for the sample. In general, the participants described less than ideal

relationships with general educators, and at times, principals in their sites.

## 5. Discussion

Indications were that the teachers in this study experienced benefits from an induction programme tailored to the needs of special education teachers. Just as in previous research, the beginning special educators in this study valued having an assigned mentor who was familiar with the field of special education. From this district mentor, they received emotional, procedural, curricular, and instructional information related to their needs as LD resource teachers. Such information may not have been as readily accessible from an individual with a general education licensure or from someone without full release time from classroom teaching. The participants in the study also commented on the positive aspects of meeting regularly with others experiencing similar difficulties and on having teacher training opportunities they viewed as useful. The district clearly implemented an array of research-based effective induction activities (Fidellar & Haselkorn, 1999; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

However, the participants' remarks also indicated that having a district assigned special education mentor, even an accessible, non evaluative mentor, was not an adequate level of support for beginning special education teachers. Indications were that they accessed a broad network of individuals as well as their own resourcefulness during their beginning months of teaching. These beginning teachers frequently relied on a special education teacher, reading specialist, or school psychologist in their 'village' for information related to their roles and responsibilities as a special education teacher. Others conducting recent research found that, for special education teachers, mentoring support from a fellow special education teacher not in the same building appeared to be less effective than support from a mentor in the same building (Whitaker, 2000; White & Mason, 2003). In addition to proximity, relying on such a broad network of individuals for support may also possibly be the influence of: (1) the increasing prevalence of reading specialists in low performing schools striving to meet the academic requirements of NCLB, or (2) the participants being in elementary school settings where intervening for basic skills difficulties and identifying students with learning needs is more prevalent than in middle school or secondary

settings. Further study with a larger group of teachers in a variety of settings would begin to clarify this emergent finding.

The indication that these first year teachers were able to focus on the specific learning needs of their students warrants discussion. The results from this study support findings from previous studies where researchers proposed that beginning teachers who have effective support move more quickly beyond the initial survival stage of teacher development (Berliner, 1988; Gold, 1996). Perhaps we can attribute a measure of our beginning teachers' focus on student learning to the level of effective support they received as well as to their district providing numerous relevant professional development opportunities. Having opportunities for professional growth is one aspect of the positive integration of teachers into their workplaces (Johnson & Birke-land, 2003; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). However, the current emphasis on accountability and high stakes testing may pressure even new teachers to focus on student outcomes and standards-based teaching, especially for mildly handicapped learners who are included in general education testing and curriculum. Again, further study is needed on the possible changing demands on special education teachers in light of current educational trends for inclusive education.

Variables related to the induction of these individuals included their personal backgrounds, their teacher education, and the conditions of their workplaces. In each respect, participants certainly varied. Three of the subjects in the study entered teaching as a second career. Yet, no real differences were detected across the five beginning special education teachers with regard to the types of assistance they needed and the sources of support they valued. Each experienced difficulties related to determining appropriate curriculum and instruction, establishing productive relationships with building colleagues, and accomplishing tasks related to special education procedures. The popularity and variety of alternative routes to certification continues to grow, given the critical demand for certified special education teachers. Based on our study, individuals entering special education as a second career do indeed bring life experiences and a measure of confidence into their roles. However, as beginning special educators, they also needed to rely on a network of emotional and professional support, primarily from other special educators, in their 'villages'.

The participants also appeared to share the ability to adjust to a variety of relationships and interactions in their new roles. They readily admitted that much of the process was 'learn as you go.' As beginning special education teachers, they experienced positive interactions with colleagues specifically responsible for the learning of students at risk. Their experiences with general education teachers in their settings were not always as positive, even though recent legislation mandates increasingly more inclusive education. Despite such challenges, the participants in the study recognised the value of persons and activities that contributed most to their growth as teachers. All five teachers, with differing personal and professional backgrounds, expressed their intent to return to their positions.

## 6. Implications

Findings from the study conducted in the United States contribute to the small body of literature focusing on special education teacher induction. During this time of educational reform emphasising accountability as well as inclusion of children with special needs, the importance of identifying factors, which encourage teachers to stay in the profession cannot be overestimated. The findings of this study have implications for increasing and improving factors, which may encourage worldwide teacher retention. Recently published research also indicates a growing concern for the support and socialisation of beginning teachers internationally (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Rippon & Martin, 2006).

A review of the literature revealed that effective induction for special education teachers in America provided opportunities for professional growth, non-evaluative feedback, and frequent contacts with a mentor in special education (Griffin et al., 2003; Puglach, 1992). The participants in our study had access to such opportunities and all were returning for a second year. As such, the findings appear to hold implications for a variety of individuals who can positively influence beginning special education teachers' experiences: those who develop induction programmes and teacher educators at the pre-service and in-service levels.

The teachers in the study discussed various elements of this particular district's orientation and induction activities. As in previous research, our beginning special educators valued having an assigned mentor familiar with their teaching responsibilities and readily available to them (Huling-Austin, 1992; Rippon &

Martin, 2006; Whitaker, 2000). A release time mentor in the same discipline appeared to be a critical source of support and information. Our teachers also valued the formative, informal structure of that mentoring relationship. However, having a site-based support system appeared just as critical as the beginning teachers described supportive persons in their ‘villages’, i.e. reading specialists, school psychologists, veteran special educators. Birkeland and Johnson (2002) reported that induction of new teachers is influenced by the collegiality between veteran and new teachers. Induction for special educators must include making use of the experienced special educators in the ‘village’.

Also, of note for those developing district orientation activities was that our participants’ comments on those activities were less than positive. The beginning special education teachers felt that orientation activities did not always relate to them as special educators. They also felt totally overwhelmed by the amount of information presented and the demands placed on their time at the beginning of the school year. If one aspect of positive socialisation of new teachers includes providing relevant professional development opportunities, then those designing orientation and induction activities may need to take into consideration the particular teaching assignments of beginning teachers.

Implications for both special education and general education teacher educators are also clear. Graduating special education teachers, whether young or experienced in other careers, need to enter the profession having practised the following skills: collaboration and consultation with general educators, decision-making skills related to curriculum and instruction, and the use of technology as a resource. Teacher educators at pre-service and in-service levels must thoroughly prepare teachers for the roles and responsibilities of both general and special education teachers in increasingly more inclusive educational settings. All general education teachers must be skilled in adjusting instruction and collaborating with special educators as they seek to meet the needs of the mildly handicapped students included in general education classrooms, curriculum, and testing. If indeed it takes a ‘village’ or network of individuals to support beginning special education teachers, then one task of teacher educators may be to prepare individuals, new and experienced, special and general education, to facilitate that networking structure.

The beginning teachers in our study took different paths on their ways to becoming special education teachers. However, they all entered the profession with a desire to make a difference in the academic lives of students with learning difficulties. Despite obstacles and at times overwhelming responsibilities in the early stage of their careers, each participant expressed their intent to stay in special education. A school environment, or ‘village’, that supports the resilience and determination of beginning special education teachers improves the likelihood of their remaining in the profession. When asked about her intent to return, Lynne responded, “Oh, yeah. I’ll do this until I die! I love these kids!”

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