



## Job Design for Special Education Teachers

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Special education teachers, especially those that teach students with behavioral/emotional challenges, have high attrition rates stemming from stress, job dissatisfaction, and low motivation. The external factors in the school setting and job contribute to special education teachers' attrition and disengagement. A relationship between motivation and satisfaction to job characteristics is explored and applied to special educator's role to determine the optimal job design. Designing the job of the special education teacher for participatory empowerment to address the factors associated with attrition, such as stress, lack of motivation, and low job satisfaction is recommended. This participatory effort requires a commitment from school administrators, professional development initiatives, and special education teachers.

*Keywords:* job design; special education; participative management; teacher retention; teacher stress; teacher job satisfaction; teacher motivation

Teachers of high-risk children have become high risk themselves (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010). Special education teachers have a greater chance of leaving their schools than their counterparts in education, especially those that teach children with behavioral and emotional challenges (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003). Although a shortage exists among qualified special educational teachers in general, a higher shortage persists for qualified educators who teach students with emotional and behavioral challenges (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003). Retaining those qualified educators are particularly challenging given the stress they experience from the design of their jobs, involving the greater likelihood of working in separate settings and working with the same children all day than other special educators (Henderson, Klein, Gonzalez, & Bradley, 2005). In addition, many special educators of emotionally challenged children experience stress due to teachers' perceived role in their jobs, derived from a lack of skills/experience, according to a review of the literature (Henderson, Klein, Gonzalez, & Bradley). The lack of skills/experience includes fewer hours of teaching, less credentials, more alternative sources of credentials, and less pre-service preparation than other special educators

(Henderson, Klein, Gonzalez, & Bradley, 2005). Some believe that the problem of high attrition rates stem directly from this lack of adequate preparation, insinuated by the suggestion to end alternative special education teacher certification avenues (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003).

Others counter that internal psychological work by special education teachers, such as that of acceptance and values, can slow the attrition rate (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010). This addresses the fact that high attrition rates of special educators are associated with stress-related burnout (Billingsley, 2003). The idea is for special educators to stay grounded in their values yet flexible in mindfully accepting events. Acceptance requires the special education teacher to willingly embrace internal experiences and remain psychologically flexible and adaptable. Values compose of relatively stable life directions. Therapy evoking the importance of values and acceptance in internal constructive and process-oriented work can ameliorate burnout, yet it ignores the external causes of stress, including better management of the external environment. For example, a quantitative analysis of trends revealed that retention of special education teachers should improve with

improvements in the organization and management of public schools (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). In addition, Emery and Vanderberg's (2010) intervention recommendation recognizes the intense emotional work of the special educator, especially apparent in the work with behavioral and emotionally challenged children whose needs are much more complex than other children's. The complex emotional, behavioral, physical, and mental needs of special needs students comprise a small part of many aspects of special educators' external working conditions.

Working conditions describe the climate of a particular workplace experienced by employees. The Occupational Outlook Handbook adds clues to the attrition puzzle, describing the working conditions: Special educators encounter considerable stressors from the heavy workloads, reams of administrative tasks, and special demands of the student, which drains teachers physically and emotionally (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2010).

If an individual or group can alter working conditions to influence the work of the special educator teacher then they have altered the design of the special education teachers' job. The job design of a special educator position is the interrelated systems and structures that facilitate the accomplishment of major work objectives so that a well-trained, interested special educator can manage the work successfully (Gersten, Gillman, Morvant, & Billingsley, 1995).

Although both internal and external factors contribute to attrition of special education teachers, such as teacher characteristics, personal factors, teacher qualifications, work environments, and teachers' affective reactions to work (Billingsley, 2003). However, the focus of this paper is to conceptually explore the connections between the work environment and stress, the challenge of staying engaged with work while experiencing stress, which coincides with a lack of satisfaction and intent to quit. Furthermore, the focus of this paper hones in on the role of job design as a solution to retain special educators, or at the very least to increase more proximally-related factors, such as work engagement, motivation, and satisfaction. The importance of job design for special education teachers lies in the acknowledgement that the school system, the school administrators, and the special education teachers can stymie the high teacher turnover rates (or attrition rates).

### **Stress and Disengagement**

In a thorough review of the literature, it states that special educators were "prone to low job satisfaction, low self-efficacy, as well as increased stress and burnout" (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010, p. 126). Employees experience a high degree of emotional exhaustion when the job scope is very low or very high and lower levels of emotional exhaustion when job scope is optimal (Xie &

Johns, 1995). Those employees with complex jobs, perceiving that the demands of their job and their abilities do not fit, experience more anxiety and stress than those who perceive a fit (Xie & Johns, 1995), hence the high attrition rates of new special education teachers and uncertified teachers, who are often in high demand areas like special education (Billingsley, 2005; Gersten et al., 2001). Not every educator experiences stress under the same conditions. Some thrive where others shrink; but, regardless of individual differences, "high levels of prolonged stress lead to teacher dissatisfaction, withdrawal from work, burnout, health problems, and attrition" (Billingsley, 2005, p. 171).

Staying engaged during stress remains challenging for special educators, yet the school contributes to the challenge. Lack of administrative support, collegial support, on-the-job learning options, and autonomy intensifies special educators experience of role dissonance, lack of commitment, and stress due to job design (e.g., paperwork burdens, student needs, and discipline concerns) (Gersten et al., 2001). Furthermore, role conflict and lack of role clarity often relate to stress (Billingsley, 2005). Without the support and decision-making latitude to change conditions and relieve role-related concerns, special educators experience stress and disengage from their work. In my opinion, students gain very little educational benefits from a teacher suffering intense job-related stress and who disengages from their work.

Contributing to the stress, special educators often struggle with a mismatch of their expectations and the actual job (i.e., role dissonance) (Gersten et al., 2001). This mismatch could stem from several factors, including barriers to identifying the needs of the student, identifying the instruction, and carrying out that instruction in an environment conducive to this process. First, knowing their students' cognitive, social, and emotional needs becomes challenging. Often special educators encounter a lack of time to understand students' needs (Billingsley, 2005; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006). The second challenge entails educators' understanding of what students need to learn, which involves concerns about the curriculum (Pollak, 2009). Third, they need to know how to successfully transfer the learning. Special educators may have some understanding of best pedagogical practices and behavior management but the setting, their experience, and their skills in other areas besides behavioral management hinder their ability to apply it (Henderson et al., 2005), especially if they do not have adequate planning time and practical professional development opportunities, including supervised practice (Billingsley, 2005). For this reason, administrators and the school structure also play a part in the gap between what educators expect and the actuality of their jobs (Billingsley, 2005; Gersten et al., 2008).

### **Lack of Satisfaction and Attrition**

If stress continues from the mismatch of what the special educator thinks that he or she can do and what can actually be accomplished, satisfaction will also likely decline. Role dissonance predicted special educators' stress due to job design and dissatisfaction with their positions (Gersten et al., 2001). Those employees who do not feel satisfied with their jobs are more likely to intend to leave their jobs (Spector, 2008). A special educators' intent to leave was a good predictor of them leaving their positions within 15 months (Gersten et al., 2001). If employees perceived that could gain more rewarding employment than their current position, then they were likely to apply for open positions and increase their chances of getting a new job (Spector, 2008).

Many job design factors directly vary with attrition. Work factors related to attrition include a lack of support, isolation, and teacher role problems (Billingsley, 2005). Also, a small survey of highly-qualified special educators found that stress related to the job and excessive paperwork mostly accounted for their attrition or relocation (Plash & Piotrowski, 2006). Other reasons for highly qualified special educators leaving their schools included threats of litigation, which may pertain to job design, and spousal relocations (Plash & Piotrowski, 2006). In 2010, federal litigation pertaining to special education frequently materialized in the areas of disciplinary actions, evaluation and assessment of the student, placement of the student in the least restrictive environment, and postsecondary transition planning (Katsiyannis, Losinski, & Prince, 2012). If the job is not designed to expose and allow for mitigation of litigation issues, then special education teachers are left vulnerable to such threats. Other reasons unrelated to job design that employees in general leave their professions include general family obligations, health-related reasons, or debilitating injuries (Spector, 2008).

### **Job Design for Motivation and Satisfaction**

Designing the special education teacher job for retention involves addressing both motivation and satisfaction. To understand the relationship of motivation and satisfaction to job design, a review of several prominent theories is presented.

Maslow (2001) explained that motivation involves a hierarchy of needs. As a lower level need is fulfilled, the next higher level need serves as a motivator (Maslow, 2001). The higher level needs of Maslow's hierarchy (i.e., esteem and self-actualization) overlap with Herzberg's motivator factors, and Maslow's lower order needs (i.e., physical, safety, and social needs) overlap with Herzberg's hygiene factors (R. Lindahl, personal communication, March 7, 2011). Herzberg (2001) espoused in his two-factor theory that an individual (e.g., a special education teacher) must have hygiene factors met, alleviating dissatisfaction, before motivator factors can lead to motivation and job satisfaction.

Although educators can feel motivated by higher level needs, such motivation does not depend on fulfilled lower level needs; motivation can occur out of order and simultaneously (Alderfer, 2001). In fact, an optimal degree of job design features exist in relation to work outcomes (Johns, 2010; Xie & Johns, 1965), so tasks that minimize or overshadow the purpose of educators' work (e.g., too much paperwork, inadequate planning time, or excessive caseloads) can undesirably impact outcomes.

Job enrichment focuses on job design for optimal internal motivation. Job enrichment involves high levels of the following: autonomy (or job freedom), accountability, task identity (or the ownership over a natural unit of work), periodic job feedback, skill variety (which is similar to growing the job scope and assigning increasingly specific tasks) (Hackman, Oldham, Janson, & Purdy, 1975; Herzberg, 2001), and task significance. Oldham and Hackman (2010) found that these job characteristics increased the likelihood that jobholders found their work meaningful, personally felt responsible for outcomes, and realized the results of their work. Furthermore, Herzberg (2001) found that the combination of the characteristics resulted in improved performance and attitudes toward the job. Oldham and Hackman explained job design for internal motivation by a combination of the job characteristics, the affective factors, and the individual differences, leading to an increase in satisfaction and outcomes over time. Regarding important individual differences, the job holders must value professional development or have a high growth need (Oldham, Hackman, & Pearce, 1976) and have the knowledge and skills to perform their work (Oldham & Hackman, 2010).

Fulfilling needs and administering the right combination of job characteristics tend to rely on using authority to dispense a series of rewards based on hopeful results. This can result in complications that may not reward the intended behavior, and even if it does, that intended behavior may fail to propagate the hoped for results (Kerr, 2001), failing to bolster student outcomes.

McGregor (2001) concurred, explaining that this management of employees fails to harness their full potential. Instead, he espoused designing the workplace for employees' self-direction using a theory y design. McGregor suggested that theory y design, contrasted with a theory x design, offers more autonomy to employees, assumes that employees have the capacity and will to improve their performance, and proffers management that evokes more participative rather than authoritarian guidance. This type of organizational design involves decentralization, empowerment, job enlargement, participative management, and self-evaluated performance appraisals (McGregor, 2001). An organization adopting this theory y design, he explained, activates motivator factors, resulting in internal employee motivation, higher productivity, and greater job

satisfaction. Essentially, he espoused that a decentralized organization where teamwork flourishes empowers employees to take ownership of their work, thus resulting in job enrichment.

One downfall of the theory y organization entails a flatter hierarchy. Team members who compete with each other for the position on the next level of the hierarchy may sabotage team members' work to gain the competitive edge. To support this notion, teamwork, given the larger context, does not always result in greater effectiveness (Johns, 2010). Yet in public schools, special educators' salary and job responsibilities remain more stable than for-profit organizations where employees compete with their co-workers for higher salaries and promotions (Brower & Balch, 2005).

Another concern about implementing theory y in special education settings involves enlarging the already large scope of the educators' roles. Herzberg (2001) explained that job design for job enrichment addresses psychological growth but does not involve enlarging the job, unless the type of work enhances the jobs' meaningfulness (Johns, 2010; Oldham & Hackman, 2010). For example, loading the special education teacher with more tasks will not engage them, unless the extra work, such as attending individual education plan meetings, personalizes their work with students, and adds meaning to their jobs. Job enlargement may attenuate motivation rather than enhance it, depending on the added tasks' meaningfulness.

Since the inception of job enrichment theories (e.g., McGregor, 2001; Oldham & Hackman, 2010; Herzberg, 2001) jobs have become more social, participative, dynamic, and more restrictive for some professionals, including educators (Oldham & Hackman, 2010). The social, participative, and dynamic demands of special educators' work involve a community. Much of the educators' job involves adapting to and working with a team of specialists, educators, the school system, administrators, parents, and the community to maintain students' progress (Billingsley, 2005).

Restrictions, federal legislation, and state regulations hold teachers more accountable for testing and qualifications. Increasing accountability combined with the large job scope of educators' jobs may result in such a combination not conducive to outcomes nor satisfaction, as Johns (2010) suggested and as evidenced by the high attrition rates of special educators related to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act compliance demands (Plash & Piotrowski, 2008). Furthermore, Johns (2010) and Xie and Johns (1995) found that combined job characteristics resulted in both positive and negative outcomes, not all positive outcomes as Herzberg (2001) and Oldham and Hackman (2010) found.

These findings add credence to the model that job characteristics are moderated by larger context (Johns, 2010). One easy solution to this is a participatory setting

in a theory y organization, as McGregor (2001) espouses and Herzberg (2001) insinuates. Job design and environmental conditions overlap in participatory decision-making school settings because as special education teachers design their jobs, they also design the support from and structure of their schools. For the most effective outcome in a participatory setting, designing a job conceptually depends on the organizational structure, national culture (Oldham & Hackman, 2010; Somech, 2010), organizational processes, effective teamwork, educator personality, and leader member exchange (Somech, 2010). Because administrators have little control of neither educators' individual differences (e.g., high growth need and personality) nor the national culture, the focus of the administrator should involve adapting the organizational structure and developing strong relations with special educators towards participatory empowerment.

#### **Implications for Practice**

Administrators retain special education teachers by empowering their staff via providing support, addressing role-related issues and restrictive conditions, and enabling professional development. Empowerment entails changing conditions to engage educators (Pollak, 2009) and relates to teacher satisfaction (Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005).

Administrators have the ability to influence intrinsic motivation. For example, although the extrinsic rewards (i.e., working conditions and salary) influenced job satisfaction for university teachers, administrators had the ability to influence only the intrinsic motivators of professional autonomy, level of professional challenge, and interaction with colleagues (Kim & Loadman, 1994). Supporting staff involves listening and addressing what special education teachers need in order to assess, plan, and implement instruction. For instance, Bozonelos (2008) suggested that administrators not only provide instrumental support by assigning special educators reasonable administrative duties, lessening caseloads, and providing resources to educators, but also providing emotional support, informational support, and appraisal support.

In addition to providing support, administrators can address role-related issues and restrictive conditions to curb stress and disengagement by facilitating change management in participatory job design, roles, and policies. To achieve this structural change, administrators willingly abdicate control over issues important to educators while maintaining the structure to enable educators to meet the students' needs. For example, principals can counteract stress from role dissonance by clarifying roles and assuring structural supports (Billingsley, 2005). As another example, administrators can give up control over aspects of the curriculum, as needed, to allow teacher adaption of it, which overwhelmingly improves student engagement (Pollak,

2009). If value-laden or highly technical decisions must be made, then delegating decision making to teachers can complicate the task at hand to an unyielding crux. Yet, a leader behavior approach offers employees a voice in the decision making process, thereby acknowledging the value of employees' input without relinquishing the decision completely and complicating the task (Spector, 2008). With a process for change, special education teachers can adapt to the dynamic needs of their students.

A process for change would also enable a responsive, dynamic professional development program that involves self-evaluation or participatory appraisals. This type of program both empowers educators and addresses the importance for special education teachers to have the knowledge and skills to perform the work for optimal performance. Empowering teachers involves enabling them to take ownership of their own development via continuous identification of context changes, continuous improvements based on that identification, and problem solving via collaboration, innovation, and trust among participants (Watts, 2009). Such opportunities to learn on the job have been shown to be important to retention (Gersten et al., 2001). Furthermore, observing classroom instruction of other educators at their school and learning from other educators through such informal and formal development opportunities also addressed the immediate needs of educators in a practical way (Pollak, 2009; Billingsley, 2005). Billingsley also suggested a responsive induction with individualized support and active mentorship to address attrition of new teachers. She conceptualized that this creation of positive work conditions and this fostering of professional development leads to special educator effectiveness, which elicits work rewards. She explained that both the work rewards and the positive work conditions lead to teacher commitment and retention.

Just as administrators have a responsibility to empower special education teachers, these teachers have a responsibility to influence school outcomes as well, which involves a dyadic, dynamic model of change. Educators can seek professional development opportunities, ask for feedback, collaborate, and craft their jobs (i.e., altering their job by using a participatory or bottom-up approach, Hackman & Oldham, 2010). Such may involve teacher-initiated cooperative planning and professional learning communities. Educators can also volunteer to serve as a teacher leader to enrich their jobs. Those teachers expressing a strong growth need and interest in policies can find satisfaction with their additional teacher leadership roles (Ribbens, 2002). Furthermore, based on the same principle of empowerment, special educators and schools can effectively empower their students to participate in curriculum planning, within defined parameters (Jagersma, 2010). After all, schools have the capacity to not only retain some special educators via

empowerment, but also to retain some students via empowerment, which is worth further investigation.

Limitations of the recommendations for practice include a lack of empirical evidence for participative, bottom-up interventions as a solution for retaining special education teachers. Perhaps the lack of evidence stems from a distal relationship between empowerment efforts and the decision of the special educator to remain in his or her position. Further investigation is needed about the relationship between the more immediate relationship or the predictive power of participative approaches to leadership of special educators and job satisfaction or motivation.

### **Conclusion**

Of all the educators, special education teachers experience the particularly pressing challenges: stress, motivation, job satisfaction, retention, and, general engagement with their jobs. Overcoming these challenges involves removing the barriers to identifying and meeting the instructional needs of students, in a way that involves the resources of a team of professionals, thereby tapping into the potentials of human capacity. Intervening can involve analyzing the work environment to dynamically design special educators' jobs for motivation, involving empowerment of special educators to adapt their jobs. Empowerment involves influencing internal motivation and facilitating change management with a participatory approach. Developing staff for continued engagement also involves a participatory approach to professional development. Educators, too, have a responsibility to change the school environment to a more engaging, participatory environment to reach the unique educational needs of the special education students.

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