

An Investigation of the Effects of Paperwork Demands on the Morale of First Year  
Special Education Teachers: Does “Red Tape” Overwhelm Green Teachers?

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my wife and best friend, Stephanie Mehrenberg. She knew exactly when to give me a push and exactly when to give me a boost.

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## ABSTRACT

### AN INVESTIGATION OF THE EFFECTS OF PAPERWORK DEMANDS ON THE MORALE OF FIRST YEAR TEACHERS: DOES “RED TAPE” OVERWHELM “GREEN TEACHERS”?

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George Mason University, 2009

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A mixed-methods study was conducted to determine if professional paperwork affected the morale of beginning special education teachers. A nationwide sample of 177 special education teachers with five or less years experience completed an online survey regarding their experiences, opinions, and attitudes towards special education paperwork. Morale of respondents was measured through reported amounts of first year paperwork help, first year job satisfaction, first year job stress, and current level of commitment to the profession. Respondents were also asked if they were assigned a reduced caseload during their first year in the classroom, and to estimate to what extent this practice may have helped them to complete instructional duties. No statistically significant correlation was found between amount of paperwork and any of the morale subscales. Although few

respondents reported being assigned a reduced caseload during their first year, the sample estimated that such a practice could increase the amount of time devoted to instructional duties by more than three hours per week. Furthermore, it was found that those with a reduced caseload reported a statistically significant greater amount of first year paperwork help and job satisfaction compared to their peers. No other variable such as being highly qualified, a career switcher, or possessing multiple certifications greatly contributed to the morale of a respondent. However, a statistically significant negative correlation was found between the number of years of teaching experience and both first year paperwork help and first year job satisfaction. Follow up telephone interviews with eighteen members of the sample revealed specific instances of the special education paperwork challenges, as well as recommendations for those new to the field. Recommendations to support new teachers with paperwork responsibilities included a reduced caseload and quality mentors. Findings are discussed in regards to best practices for new special educators, as well as suggested topics for future research.

## 1. Introduction

### General Statement of the Problem

Teacher turnover continues to be a severe crisis in America's schools. The financial costs associated with the problem are staggering. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2007) estimates that the annual costs related to recruiting, hiring, training and supporting new teachers are \$7.3 billion annually.

Special education teachers (SETs) are in far shorter supply than any other content area (McLeskey, Tyler, and Flippin, 2004). Beginning SETs leave the field for many reasons, but one of the more problematic is due to a sense of role conflict (Singh and Billingsley, 1996). SETs may become frustrated, angry or experience stress if they feel that there is a large discrepancy between the types of tasks that they regularly engage in and those that they expect to do. Specifically, it is felt that excessive paperwork and bureaucracy has prevented some individuals from doing what they believe is their primary duty, to teach.

### Background of the Problems

#### *Special Education Teacher Shortage*

The first formal efforts aimed at addressing the SET shortage took place in 1958 because of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved the NDEA largely as a response to the Soviet Union's success with

the Sputnik satellite. The main purpose of the NDEA was to provide funds to improve and expand science and math education in American schools. In conjunction with this legislation, Eisenhower passed public law 85-926, which provided modest funds to educate teachers of children with mental retardation.

This law represented the first federal funding specifically earmarked for the training of SETs. The following year, congress passed public law 86-158, the Training of Professional Personnel Act of 1959. This follow-up legislation provided an increase in funds for the training of teachers of students with mental retardation (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996).

In 1961, the government provided the resources to train teachers of the deaf through public law 87-276, the Special Education Act. Both the United States government and society at large were evolving in their attitudes and understanding of the needs of students with disabilities. By providing monies to both universities and prospective teachers, the government had acknowledged that children with exceptionalities had needs that required specialized instruction by knowledgeable and skilled professionals. Finding a sufficient supply of individuals to provide those services was already perceived as a distinct challenge.

The shortage of quality SETs increased exponentially with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Widely regarded as the origin of modern special education services, this law guaranteed, among other things, that all children, regardless of disability, were afforded a free, appropriate public education

(Turnbull III, Stowe, & Huerta, 2007). The zero reject component of the law substantially increased the demand for SETs and inevitably contributed to its shortage.

In simple terms, the zero reject principle stated that every child, regardless of the severity of a disability, was entitled to an education. Schools were no longer merely required to make necessary accommodations for students with established disabilities. They were required to engage in an active child find process.

In its inaugural year, a total of 3,579,680 students, ages 6 to 21 years old, received special education services (Whorton, Siders, Fowler, & Naylor, 2000). A sudden, acute need for qualified instructors to work with these students presented a serious challenge. To the chagrin of many school districts, the law provided neither money nor support for adequate recruitment purposes.

Over the next decade, there was a significantly increased demand for exceptional needs teachers as the number of students with disabilities also grew. Public Law 99-457, The Education Act Amendments of 1986 exacerbated the dilemma. This law introduced the need for early intervention. Now infants and toddlers with disabilities were also guaranteed appropriate educational and therapeutic services that were previously limited to school age children (National Maternal and Child Health Clearinghouse, 1989) .

By 1990, an increase of over one million special education students forced school districts to play an unsuccessful game of catch up with soaring enrollments. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, went through a series of significant updates and revisions.

For example, in the 1991-92 school year, autism and traumatic brain injuries were added as additional disability categories covered under the law (Whorton et al., 2000). In that first year, 5,415 children with autism required services by SETs. By the 2004-05 school year, the number identified skyrocketed to over 140, 000, a 2800% increase (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) promised sweeping changes for all American school children, not just those in special education. NCLB had three main purposes:

1. To reform American schools on behalf of all children.
2. To challenge the low expectations and illiteracy that affects many students.
3. To increase students' academic competencies, especially reading in the early years (Turnbull III et al., 2007).

NCLB forced the American education system to be held more accountable in several ways including a reliance on standardized tests to measure student progress and a larger emphasis on research based practices. One tenet of the law that presented a particular challenge for SETs was the "highly qualified" requirement.

The term "highly qualified" had specific connotations in connection with NCLB. In an attempt to assure that a teacher had adequate skills and content knowledge, a series of minimum requirements was established for educators in core subject areas (The White House Report on No Child Left Behind, n.d.)

This new set of demands presented additional challenges to the supply of America's SETs. Under the provisions of the law, those teachers who only possessed provisional or emergency certifications were given strict deadlines in order to fulfill licensure requirements or risk termination. Additionally, parents of students taught by less than fully certified educators were notified of this fact, in writing, on a yearly basis.

A second obstacle presented by the legislation was that teachers of record must have demonstrated mastery of content knowledge in all subjects taught. SETs at the secondary level were at a distinct disadvantage because of the relatively few who had dual certification. Those who desired to remain as the teacher of record in a self-contained classroom were forced to pass a standardized test, take classes, create a teaching portfolio or some other type of benchmark, known as the high objective uniform standards of evaluation (HOUSE) created by their state (The White House Report on No Child Left Behind, n.d.).

The SET of the twenty-first century is being pulled in many directions. Demands and strict requirements from the federal government, state government and local school district has caused many to question whether it is all worth it. Additional burdens attributed to excessive paperwork may be their tipping point to leave the field.

### *Excessive Paperwork*

The challenges of accountability in special education and the inevitable paperwork associated with it had a relatively shorter history than that of the SET shortage. For the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and before, American schools had little or

no legally enforceable responsibilities to teach students with disabilities. When they did, there was no clearly defined expectations of where or what they were to teach.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, was among the first federal mandates aimed at providing equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The crux of the legislation prohibited “discrimination solely on the basis of disability against any otherwise qualified individual with a disability in any program receiving federal assistance” (Turnbull III et al., 2007). Even though the legislation was originally designed to help otherwise capable adults with disabilities in the workplace, other establishments were liable to enact its implications. One of the institutions most keenly affected by this law was the American public school system.

It was now no longer acceptable to exclude children from educational or extra-curricular opportunities simply because of a disability. School districts that chose to ignore the law could be found liable in a parental lawsuit or even lose federal funding. The stakes were raised considerably. Because of these perceived threats, accountability became a much bigger issue. Bureaucracy and paperwork were introduced to deal with this burgeoning problem.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 had a profound effect on the increase in special education paperwork. One of the landmark components of the legislation was the introduction of the Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP was designed to be a working document that enabled a multi-disciplinary team to make a series of education-related plans, decisions, and goals regarding the special education student.



Originally, each IEP had to address a minimum of seven specific areas...

1. A child's present level of performance
2. A statement of measurable, annual goals
3. A statement of special education and related services, supplementary aides, program modifications and support.
4. An explanation of the extent, if any, to which the child will not participate in general education services or interact with his non-disabled peers.
5. A statement of accommodations and modifications needed to participate in standardized assessments, if appropriate.
6. The frequency, location, and duration of modifications and services.
7. A statement of how progress will be measures and how it will be communicated to parents or guardians.

In addition, post-secondary employment, life-skills, and educational considerations were put into place for older students (Bateman & Linden, 1998).

Each IEP was theoretically unique and required significant time, discussion and effort from the SET to ensure that all portions of the plan were accurately followed. Additional paperwork was associated with other parts of the law including the identification and re-evaluation processes.

The next law that contributed to the paperwork burden was the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA '97). IDEA '97 created several additions to the intent and the scope of the IEP (Turnbull III et al., 2007). Some of the changes were created in the spirit of the least restrictive environment mandate, such as reporting on

how a child would be involved in the general curriculum, including general education goals and progress checks. If a student was not participating in general education services, the teacher was now expected to document the specific reason why the child would not directly benefit from these activities.

A further increase of bureaucratic responsibilities included regular communication to parents about their child's progress towards mastery of goals, documented consideration of additional factors such as assistive technology or limited English proficiency when determining eligibility, and an additional section on the IEP that addressed the extent and accommodations needed for a student to participate in statewide and district wide assessments (Families and Advocates Partnership for Education, 1999).

The 2004 update of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was the first special education legislation that acknowledged the paperwork burden and made minor updates to alleviate special educators of some of their non-instructional duties. For example, members of the IEP team could now be excused from attending a meeting if their focus was not to be discussed or changed.

Similarly, IEP addendums or changes could be approved without the need for a physical meeting, if a parent had prior consent and approval (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). It should be noted that neither of these changes directly reduced the amount of paperwork associated with IEPs, only the amount and extent of the meetings.

IDEA 2004 also piloted The Paperwork Reduction Act among participating states. The Paperwork Reduction Act had two components. The first allowed up to 15 states to

propose ways to reduce paperwork and administrative tasks placed on teachers and schools. The second program allowed up to 15 states to extend an IEP for up to three years with parental approval.

Three years later, the pilot programs have yet to get off of the ground. According to an article in Education Weekly, states have been reluctant to participate because of two reasons. One reason mentioned is that the reduction of paperwork is no guarantee of a reduction of liability. The only way to defend against possible litigation is with ample documentation.

A second reason mentioned why states chose not to participate in the program reflects directly on the nature of bureaucracy. States feared that the additional documentation needed to measure the effectiveness of the program would be too burdensome (Samuels, 2006).

#### Significance of the Problems

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the largest professional organization dedicated to improving the educational opportunities of students with exceptional needs. At the 2007 CEC National Conference and Expo, members of the Council's advisory board met to compile a list of the top ten most critical issues facing the field of special education today. By doing so, the board planned to prioritize those topics for which policy and research are most needed. (Council for Exceptional Children, 2007).

Two of the top ten issues that the assembly cited were "staff shortage" and "paperwork." By their inclusion on the list, each of these issues was recognized as a

pervasive and challenging dilemma within the field of special education. However, in tandem, these issues have the potential for serious repercussion for the future of the field.

By most accounts, there is a severe and chronic shortage of SETs in American public schools. The term “shortage” is defined in the research as “full-time equivalent teaching positions that were left vacant or filled by teachers who were not fully-certified for the position to which they were assigned.” (Boe, 2006)

Over the past 17 years, there has been a 47% increase in the demand for new SETs. In the year 2000 alone, there was a need for 74,000 new hires for America’s public schools (Boe, Sunderland, & Cook, 2006). A full ninety-eight percent of the nation’s school districts report a SET shortage (ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, 2001). Furthermore, special education has been cited as the area of the greatest shortage of teachers among the 200 largest U.S. cities (American Federation of Teachers, 1999)

The overall supply problem has become worse in recent years since demand for fully certified, highly-qualified SETs continues to grow. Boe (2006) stated that there is now a shortage in both the quantity and quality of America’s SETs. Recent federal legislation has significantly raised the bar in regards to the qualifications and credentials associated with becoming a SET. It therefore presents an even greater challenge for the field when only 63% of first-year SETs hold certificates for their main assignments (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003).

Even though students with special needs would derive the most benefit from highly qualified teachers, they are often the children least served by them. McLeskey,

Tyler, and Flippen (2004) reported that it was estimated that over 800,000 special education students were taught by personnel who were not fully certified.

The SET shortage has also has severe financial ramifications for school districts, and consequently, taxpayers. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2007) it costs \$8,750 to recruit, hire process and train one new teacher in an urban area. For Fairfax County, one of the school districts participating in this study, this translates into an annual cost of \$2,441,250 to replace only its SETs.

#### *Challenges of Excessive Paperwork*

SETs abandon the field for many reasons. Some are universal to teaching such as low pay or a perceived lack of support from administration. However, one source of frustration and angst that disproportionately affects this group is excessive paperwork.

Paperwork is defined as “the documents, reports, brochures, and the like that are filled out, distributed, or submitted by school personnel or parents to meet procedural requirements of federal, state, or local special education law or regulations” (Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, n.d.). Special educators may feel that there is a lower priority placed on the tasks that they were hired to do (teach) than those that they are regularly expected to do (paperwork).

In addition paperwork and related administrative duties, take up a significant amount of time for the average SET to complete. Carlson, Chen, Schroll, and Klein (2003) found that the average SET spends five hours per week on paperwork. Furthermore, eight percent reported spending more than 14 hours a week on paperwork.

Fifty-three percent of the 972 special educators sampled across the nation stated that paperwork and routine duties interfered with their teaching to a great extent. Compared to other tasks, the average special educator spent more time on paperwork than grading papers, communicating with parents, sharing expertise with colleagues, supervising paraprofessionals, and attending IEP meetings combined.

In a similar study, 250 state, district, and school staff were surveyed among seven diverse school districts throughout the United States. On average, special educators reported spending a total of 58.9 minutes per day on paperwork related to the IEP process. Focus group interviews with participants revealed that paperwork was not considered a burden if educators felt that it served a useful purpose. Too often, however, special education paperwork was described as wasteful, repetitive, and redundant (Kirlin et al., 2004).

#### Specific Problem

The problems associated with SET attrition are well-documented (Billingsley, 2004, McLeskey, et al., 2004, Boe, 2006). Likewise, there is a body of research that cites excessive paperwork as a severe problem for SETs (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004, Dangal, Bunch, & Coopman, 1987, Platt & Olson, 1990). However, there is currently no empirical data to support or refute a correlation between the amount of paperwork a first year SET has to complete and her commitment to the profession. One of the main objectives of this research is to fill that void.

Additionally, it is known that SETs often report their first year in the classroom as being particularly stressful and challenging to their morale. This research extends that

knowledge by investigating whether experienced teachers reflect upon their own first year as being as stressful as those currently experiencing it.

The qualitative component of this research addresses another gap in the research. It is unknown how successful first year teachers cope with the demands of paperwork. Through interviews, it may be discovered what preparations, experiences and dispositions positively affect a special educator's ability to handle the non-instructional requirements of her job.

#### Research Questions

1. Does the amount of paperwork affect the level of job satisfaction for first-year special education teachers?
2. Does the amount of paperwork affect the level of job stress for first-year special education teachers?
3. Does the amount of paperwork affect first-year special education teacher's commitment to the profession?
4. Which, if any, demographics positively affect the first year special education teacher's ability to handle the demands of paperwork?

5. Does the recollection of how paperwork demands affected first year morale differ between beginning special education teachers and those in the early-stage of their careers?

6. Does a school policy of a reduced caseload positively affect the morale of first year special education teachers?

#### Definitions of Key Terminology

Paperwork-Refers to all documents, reports, brochures and the like that are filled out, distributed or submitted by school personnel or parents to meet procedural requirements of Federal or state special education law or regulation (Kirlin et al., 2004).

Morale- The capacity of an individual to maintain belief in an institution or goal. In this study, morale is measured through four common sub-sections: a.)perceived helpfulness, b.)job satisfaction, c.) job stress and d.) commitment to the profession (Kirlin et al., 2004).

Perceived Helpfulness-The degree to which first year special educators found specific variables, such as college courses or mentors, useful in completing paperwork.

Job Satisfaction- Primary affective reactions of individuals to various facets of the job and the job experience (Parasuraman, 1982).



Job Stress-The psychological response state of disturbed affect experienced by individuals in relation to their job and refers to such intrapsychic phenomenon as frustration, tension, and strain (Parasuraman, 1982).

Reduced Caseload- A formal policy, in some schools, in which first-year special education teachers are responsible for less paperwork than their experienced peers.

## 2. Literature Review

### Introduction

The relevant literature review for this study was divided into three broad categories: (a.) the special education teacher shortage, (b.) challenges and needs of the first year special education teacher, (c.) the influence of paperwork demands as an attrition factors for special education teachers.

The literature search procedures are described below, followed by the relevant body of literature associated with each of the three categories. Each category concludes with a synthesis of the findings, and suggestions for further research.

### Literature Search Procedures

PsychINFO, ERIC and Digital Dissertation databases were searched by a series of key words associated with each of the three categories. Key words and variations associated with the first category, the special education teacher shortage included “special education teacher,” with “shortage,” “attrition,” and “supply and demand.” Some of the most fruitful key words and variations associated with the second category, challenges and needs of first year special education teachers, included “beginning,” “novice,” or “first year” with “special education teacher” with “needs,” “problems,” or “challenges.” The influence of paperwork demands as an attrition factor for special education teachers category was best served by the key words and variations “special education teacher”

with “paperwork,” “IEP,” or “non-instructional duties” with “attrition,” “stress,” or “satisfaction.”

An ancestry search was completed by collecting and cross-referencing the reference section of each acceptable contribution to the literature review. A hand search was completed on for each issue of the last five years (2002-07) in the following educational journals, *Exceptional Children*, *The Journal of Special Education*, *Exceptionality*, and *Teacher Education and Special Education*.

#### Literature Inclusion Procedures

The literature base for this study consisted of peer-reviewed journal research articles, scholarly books, book chapters, doctoral dissertations, research reports sponsored by the federal government, colleges or universities, and private organizations. If a report or dissertation served as the basis for a peer-reviewed journal article, then only the latter was considered for inclusion. The age of the literature was not considered a restricting factor in order to help support the notion that attrition among SETs has been a chronic problem.

#### The Special Education Teacher Shortage

There is a severe and chronic shortage of SETs in American public schools. The term “shortage” is defined in the research as “full-time equivalent teaching positions that were left vacant or filled by teachers who were not fully-certified for the position to which they were assigned” (Boe, 2006, p.138).

Over the past 17 years, there has been a 47% increase in the demand for new SETs. In the year 2000 alone, there was a need for 74,000 new hires for America’s public

schools (Boe, Sunderland, & Cook, 2006). A full ninety-eight percent of the nation's school districts report a SET shortage (ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, 2001). Furthermore, special education has been cited as the area of the greatest shortage of teachers among the 200 largest U.S. cities (American Federation of Teachers, 1999).

### *Demographics*

Some variables such as student demographics, school location or teacher ethnicity are reported to contribute more heavily to the SET shortage. For example, teachers of student with behavioral or emotional disabilities are in drastically short supply. So much so that there is a greater need for them than any other type of teacher in general or special education. They even trump the much more publicized need for teachers of science and math (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004).

Historically, both rural (Westling & Whitten, 1996; Ludlow, 1998) and urban school districts (Morvant & Gersten, 1995) have been challenged in their ability to hire and retain SETs. Similarly, areas of high poverty continue to have multiple vacancies in all teaching areas (Ingersoll, 2004; Peske & Haycock, 2006).

Regionally, the Western United States has had the most difficult time filling vacant special education positions (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003). Furthermore, individual states greatly fluctuate in their ability to hire and retain fully certified SETs. New York, Hawaii, Louisiana, and Delaware all reported shortages above the 25% mark for the 2000-01 school year. At the other extreme, for the same time period, the commonwealth of Massachusetts reported all of their special educators for students, ages

6-21, fully certified (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). It is difficult to attribute these differences merely to salary, since both New York and Delaware were among the ten highest paying states for teachers for that year, yet Massachusetts was not (American Federation of Teachers, 1999).

The shortage of SETs from diverse backgrounds has been another area of concern for the field. The heterogeneity represented by the student population does not mirror that of the teachers. Nationally, 38% of students in special education are from cultural or linguistically diverse backgrounds, compared to only 14% of their teachers (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004).

One SET subgroup that is particularly scarce is the African-American male. According to Nettles and Perna (1997) , the national percentage of SETs who meet these criteria are 2.2 at the secondary level and 0.4 at the elementary level. It is largely unknown how this general lack of diversity affects students with special needs.

The overall supply problem has grown more severe in recent years since demand for fully certified, highly-qualified SETs continues to grow. Boe (2006) states that there is now a shortage in both the quantity and quality of America's SETs. Federal legislation such as the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) and No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 have significantly raised the bar in regards to the qualifications and credentials associated with becoming a SET. It therefore presents an even greater challenge for the field when only 63% of first-year SETs hold certificates for their main assignments (Katsiyannis et al., 2003).

The group that is hardest hit by the consequences of the teacher shortage is the students. McLeskey et al, (2004) reported that it was estimated that over 800,000 special education students were taught by personnel who were not fully certified. Quite often the children who could benefit most from a certified instructor are the same ones least likely to be taught by one.

#### *Recruitment versus Attrition*

Several sources (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell & Smith, 1992; McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin, 2004) stated that retention plays a much bigger role than recruitment in ending the SET shortage. A popular metaphor compares attrition to continuously pouring water into a bucket with a large hole in the bottom of it.

In a research synthesis on SET retention and analysis, Billingsley (2004) reported that age (which also included experience) was the only variable that was consistently linked to attrition in the literature. Younger and less experienced teachers were at a much higher risk of leaving the profession.

#### *The First Five Years*

Singer (1993) labeled the first five years of a special educator's career as being particularly "hazardous." The researcher followed the career paths of over 6,600 newly hired SETs in Michigan and North Carolina over a period of 13 years. Almost 13% of the first year SETs in her study quit after their first year and 43% did so within five. On average, the sample remained in special education for seven years, giving credence to the "hole in the bucket" metaphor.

These findings were later replicated in a survey commissioned by the Council for Exceptional Children. A nationwide, random survey sent out to a number of special education stakeholders, including general education teachers, special education teachers, special education administrators, and school principals. The data reported by the sample of 246 SETs confirmed the statement that “four of every ten special educators entering the field leave special education before their fifth year of teaching” (Coleman, 2000) .

The research of Menlove, Garnes, and Salzberg (2004) also characterized the half decade as a time of transition. This is especially true for young beginning SETs. Therefore this study explored external motivators such as getting married, moving, or having children. These reasons account for the attrition of approximately one-third of the sample that quit during that time period.

### *Job Dissatisfaction*

Many SETs often cite that they leave the field due to job dissatisfaction. Is job satisfaction more prevalent among SETs compared to all educators? Stempein and Loeb (2002) compared job satisfaction between groups of general education and SETs. They received survey responses from 116 teachers (58% response rate) from eight suburban school districts in proximity to Detroit, Michigan.

Using an 18 item, Likert-scale survey, it was revealed that the SETs had a lower level of job satisfaction than either general education teachers or those who taught some sort of combination of the two. Dissatisfaction levels were highest among teachers who were young or inexperienced.

It should be noted that only teachers of students with emotional disabilities were included among the special education sample, therefore the authors state that the opinions of the participants may not be totally representational of most SETs. Future research would benefit from comparing job satisfaction among special educators who teach students with various disabilities.

### *Why Teachers Stay*

The literature is not completely “doom and gloom” regarding the promise of new SETs. Edgar and Pair (2005) tracked down 161 alumni of the University of Washington’s special education cohort program. All participants graduated between five and ten years from the time of the survey. The researchers found 78% of the sample still working as SETs, with an additional 7% in education-related positions. The authors attributed the high retention rate to the both the rigors associated with a five-year Master’s level teacher cohort and the mature, dedicated demographic of student usually associated with such a program.

Zabel and Zabel (2001) contributed another optimistic study to the research base. The authors did not study attrition per se, but rather which variable led to teacher burnout. The authors surveyed 300 practicing special educators to gauge their levels of emotional exhaustion and professional stress. Their results failed to detect a statistically significant correlation between either the age of a teacher or their amount of experience and the risk for burnout. However older, more experienced teachers did feel a greater sense of personal accomplishment in their efforts.



The research clearly shows a chronic shortage of SETs in American schools. It is found that some particular demographics are less likely represented in the field than others. It is predicted that the increased demands in certification and training to become a highly qualified teacher may make the pool of potential applicants even smaller.

It will be up to researchers and policy makers to find creative methods to attract the next generation of SETs. By asking “what are we doing right?” rather than “what are we doing wrong?” scholars may better understand what keeps instructors satisfied and in the classroom for the long haul. Teacher educators may gain considerable insight from focusing on those individuals whom have dedicated their lives to finding success and satisfaction through teaching. Their attitudes, experiences, and knowledge might be shared with novices to encourage them to consider special education as a lifelong career, not merely a temporary job.

#### Challenges and Needs of the First Year Special Education Teachers

Regardless of the specific attrition rate, most scholars would agree that beginning SETs, especially those in their first year of service, have a specific set of needs that must be met in order for them to gain a sense of personal and professional accomplishment and self-worth. Scholars have attempted to understand these needs by asking the teachers themselves through various interviews, surveys and case studies.

### *Self-Reported Needs*

A focus group of 35 beginning SETs was interviewed to determine and prioritize their most significant areas of need (Whitaker, 2000a). The group almost unanimously described their first year of teaching as being “harder than they had anticipated.” Furthermore, the two areas of most critical need were “system information related to special education” and “emotional support.”

“Systems information related to special education” was most often expressed as the paperwork and procedures that go along with the job. Participants consistently found these tasks to be overwhelming and discouraging. One teacher remarked:

Nobody helped me to fill out the paperwork. I had to figure that out on my own and then send it across the street and have the director send it back to me and say, “You didn’t do this” or “You didn’t do that.” It was all procedural things... That stuff was very hard for me. (p.29)

Another participant vents frustration regarding the paperwork and what it takes away from actually teaching:

Your first year you are so bogged down with all that paperwork that when you start to set your priorities the kids kind of come out last, and the curriculum comes out last... There is so much emphasis put on the paperwork... I think that’s where the burnout comes. (p.30)

The author suggested that schools provide staff development to help new teachers learn proper procedures and the correct way to fill out various documents. Samples of

completed forms and training manuals were also recommended as methods to alleviate these problems.

The need for emotional support was discussed by participants' desire to have someone answer questions and provide encouragement. Some of the participants had a formal mentor during their formative year and consistently found it to be extremely beneficial. The author advises using mentors as a way to counteract the isolation, anxiety and confusion often associated with those new to the workplace.

The results of this focus group study were mirrored in a survey of 156 individuals relating to their first year of teaching special education in South Carolina (Whitaker, 2003). Participants used a modified Likert scale to rate the perceived amount of help they needed in each of eight areas.

The eight areas were:

1. Systems information-special education
2. Emotional support
3. Systems information- school
4. Materials
5. Curriculum/Instruction
6. Discipline
7. Interactions with others
8. Management

Next, respondents scored the amount of actual help received for each of the areas.

Once again “systems information related to special education” was ranked the top perceived area of need for first year SETs. It was also the area of the greatest need discrepancy, even though all eight areas of need had a statistically significant discrepancy at the .005 level.

Conderman and Stephens (2000) explored the needs of those new to the profession through the results of an open-ended survey using a small sample. Thirteen respondents relayed their most significant struggles, concerns and achievements as beginning teachers of students with disabilities. Some of the more prevalent challenges included collaborating with general education teachers and meeting the individual needs of each student. Popular coping strategies to meet these challenges were: consulting with knowledgeable co-workers and administrators, staying organized and engaging in both physically and mentally healthy habits.

#### *Needs of Alternatively Licensed SETs*

One of the most prevalent methods of coping with the current shortage of SETs is the rapid increase of first-year teachers with alternative licensure. Alternative licensure route are extremely varied in the amount of training, support, and experiences provided to participants before stepping foot in the classroom. However, they are all broadly defined as “any type of program that does not require traditional university teacher-preparation” (Feistritz, 2000). While the current body of literature is inconclusive regarding the long-term effectiveness of these teachers, teacher education scholars are beginning to probe the first year needs and challenges of this subgroup.

For example, DeBettencourt and Howard (2004) surveyed 59 alternatively-certified SETs three times over the course of their first year in the classroom. Participants were simultaneously enrolled in a two-year college sponsored preparation program while teaching full-time in neighboring school districts. Researchers wanted to know what issues presented the most problems for these teachers, whether these problems were similar to those most mentioned by traditionally certified SETs, and if these problems became more manageable with time and experience.

Participants responded to nine Likert-scaled statements regarding their degree of confidence (e.g., I feel everyday that I become a better teacher), and support (e.g., My mentor has helped me with lesson planning, time management or discipline). They also completed 3-5 open ended questions regarding how their alternative certification has or has not helped them prepare to become a good teacher.

Overall, the authors report that many findings were similar to needs of traditionally certified SETs. Results show that whereas 68% of the sample reported that teaching was harder than they expected, a full 98% believed that they had become better teachers by the end of the year. The authors state that these findings are similar to the reported attitude and experiences of traditionally certified SETs.

When asked what things were most surprising to them as a new SET, the most common response was “the low academic functioning level of their students” (30%). Other popular responses included “negative attitudes of co-teachers” (15%), “being tired at the end of the day” (12%), and “demanding parents” (3%). Especially relevant to this literature review, “paperwork responsibilities, such as writing IEPs” were mentioned by 5

of 33 respondents (15%). This was tied for the second place among most mentioned surprising problems.

Not all beliefs, opinions, or experiences reported by the alternative certified SETs mirrored those of traditionally certified peers. Professional development opportunities presented a specific challenge for this group. Many members of the sample mentioned that they did not participate in any additional professional development opportunities other than those required by their program. Only 39% of the sample had joined any type of professional organization. In the initial survey, only 52% of teacher read professional resources, but by the third survey, that percentage rose to 93%.

The relatively low rates associated with professional development may be explained by different factors. Participants may be too tired or busy to extend themselves any further. They may perceive professional development activities as being redundant or gratuitous when compared to their current ongoing training. There is also the possibility that some participants feel that they will do what they need in order to “get by,” and that a long-term commitment to the profession is not yet possible or even desired. Further studies should investigate this line of questions.

### *Case Studies*

A more intimate research method that explores the needs of the first year special educator is the case study. Mastropieri (2001) wrote of several areas of concern during her own first year as a teacher of high school students with disabilities. Some of the problems she encountered were in the area of behavior management (e.g., verbally aggressive students and those that brought weapons to school), curriculum issues (e.g.,

not having appropriate supplies and not having mastery with the content) and non-instructional responsibilities (e.g., working with a paraprofessional, unplanned meetings and overwhelming paperwork). The author asserted that many of the problems that plagued her as a first year teacher in 1976 are still associated with the needs of the present day novice special educator. A quality mentor and a solid teacher preparation program are recommended to help alleviate some of these problems, as well as positive personality traits such as resiliency, resourcefulness and a passion for teaching.

Another case study involved a first year teacher of elementary students with learning disabilities. Busch, Penderson, Espin, and Weissenberger (2001) detailed problems related to the academic and behavioral inconsistencies of students. These included a second grader who engaged in power struggles, a sixth grader who received reading instruction with second graders, and a student with limited English proficiency.

Another significant problem involved limited parental involvement. This was particularly a concern when a parent's participation was crucial, such as at Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. The teacher felt that communication with parents was often laborious and time-consuming.

The authors recommended first-year teachers to be assertive in finding an appropriate co-worker to serve as a mentor. Teachers were encouraged to link up with a competent veteran to provide support and answer questions to reduce the stress associated with being a novice.

They also recommend seeking out examples of well-written IEPs and assessment reports to use as a model for your own work. It is suggested that acquiring quality reference templates will help save time and improve productivity.

MacDonald and Speece (2001) reported on the trials and tribulations of a first year teacher of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Contrary to what might be expected, classroom management was not the most prevalent need for this educator. Instead, she relayed her sense of feeling overwhelmed by the never ending series of tasks. She stated:

I found myself in the classroom long before school began in the morning and long after the children had gone home in the afternoon. There were curricula to learn, solutions to behavior problems to ponder, papers to grade, lessons to plan, and a classroom to keep organized, interesting, and user friendly. (p.87)

The teacher shares the challenges associated with time management and actually finding time to teach. It seemed that so many other variables prevented her from doing what was called for in her job description...teaching. She states, "I didn't fully understand the amount of time that is taken away from instruction for other activities, including standardized testing, Individualized Education Program development, and annual reviews in the spring." (p. 88)

Do first-year SETs have similar challenges and needs regardless of the particular disability of their students? Two case studies of new teachers, one of students with autism (Boyer & Lee, 2001) and one of students with mental retardation (Butcher-Carter & Scruggs, 2001) reveal that some concerns may be universal.



Both teachers give further credence to the assertion that many of the struggles associated with being a special educator have very little to do with actually teaching.

Boyer and Lee reported:

Coordinating the legal aspects of IDEA 97—the one-on-one instruction frequently needed to address student IEP goals, documentation of progress and the expectations for inclusion was a challenge complicated by lack of time and personnel. There was so much to learn so fast. (p.79)

These problems were compounded due to the fact that the parents of many of the teacher's students had professional advocates, and she was therefore always afraid of being questioned, harassed or even sent to court.

The teacher described in the Butcher-Carter and Scruggs article also describes the substantial amount of stress associated with her job, especially the non-teaching parts. A number of factors affected her so severely that she became physically ill. The teacher decided it would be best to transfer schools. Whereas, this change in venue may have improved her outlook on her profession, she still had many professional obligations that needed to be fulfilled from her first work site. She explained, "I still had to do all 31 annual reviews from my first school and finish up 5 at my new school. I was given 2 days to do the 31 reviews and was not allowed back into the building except for those meeting dates." (p. 103)

Although both case studies describe similar stressful situation, only the Boyer and Lee article described utilizing a mentor to help alleviate tense situations. The teacher explained how she found it immensely helpful to have an experienced co-worker to

bounce ideas off of, to answer her question and to provide emotional support when needed.

Unfortunately, not all first-year teachers are afforded this luxury. One of the prominent themes of Butcher-Carter and Scruggs article was the teacher's pervasive sense of isolation. The teacher stated, "Very few school personnel appeared to view the special education students as an equal part of their school, and our acceptance in the school was, at best, reserved and grudging." (p. 102)

At the peak of her frustration and isolation, the beginning teacher spoke bluntly about her perceived lack of help. "Overall, I felt that I received little support from district administrators, school administrators or colleagues in the school, itself." (p. 103)

### *Mentors*

The presence of a mentor has been established as an effective level of support for beginning teachers. It has the potential to allow novices to feel more competent and motivated (Huling-Austin, 1986; Odell & Ferrarro, 1992). However, there appears to be scant literature that specifically investigates the impact of mentors on SETs.

One study that does relate to this topic surveyed 156 first-year SETs about their perceived level of effectiveness of their assigned mentor (Whitaker, 2003). Most respondents reported of either an extremely good or extremely bad relationship. Several recurring factors contributed to these opinions. For example, the frequency of interactions with the mentor was a key contribution to a respondent's perception of effectiveness. Those who met together at least once a week reported the highest levels of satisfaction.

Mentors did not need to be of the same gender as their protégé to be deemed effective, nor did they need to share a common planning period. However, a statistically significant relationship was found between those mentors who were certified SETs and the perceived level of effectiveness. This fact is especially critical since only 33% of the mentors in the study possessed this criterion.

Another study found that 60% of the beginning SET sample was assigned a formal mentor in their first year of teaching. However, only 66% of those respondents found interactions with a formal mentor to be moderately or greatly helpful. Instead other special educators and department chairs were seen to fill that role (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004).

#### *Reasons to Stay*

A different approach to the questions presented by beginning teacher attrition is to find out what variables motivate new special educators to want to stay in the field. Gehrke and Murri (2006) conducted a mixed-methods study with 8 second-year instructors who felt satisfied in their profession.

Open-ended interviews revealed that participants were supported by co-teachers, principals and special education district administrators. All except one felt that their case load were manageable. Most of them also felt as if their duties were clearly defined and they knew what was expected of them. Availability of professional development opportunities and the usefulness of undergraduate training were also seen in a positive light. These findings were then triangulated through a Likert scale survey.

It should be mentioned that even though this study dealt with reasons why special educators choose to stay in the field, it did not include any topics of intrinsic motivation such as, “I feel that I make a difference” or “I enjoy improving the lives of children.” Future research should examine if these variables play a part in beginning teachers’ decisions to stay in the field.

#### *Summary of First Year SET Research*

A common thread found in the majority of research on first year SETs was the need for support and structure. Although the research differed on which specific sources, such as mentors or administrators, provided the most useful support, it was clear that novices appreciated guidance, recognition and praise from fellow professionals.

A second prevalent theme in the literature was the need a need for clear, realistic expectation of professional duties and responsibilities. SETs must “wear many hats.” It was therefore imperative that those brand-new to the profession understand all that was expected of them, and that they were comfortable with all of the demands of the field in addition to strictly teaching.

Additional research needs to explore the challenges and needs of first year SETs. It is inconclusive whether the needs of first year teachers are substantially different from those in the beginning stages of their careers (five years experience or less). It is also unclear as to whether the needs and challenges of first year SETs are dissimilar to first year general education teachers.

## The Influence of Paperwork Demands as Attrition Factors for Special Educators

There are many reasons why SETs choose to leave the field. In an executive summary on the subject, Billingsley (2003) proposed four broad categories to explain why SETs leave their jobs. The reasons are:

1. Teacher characteristics and personal factors
2. Teacher qualifications
3. Work environment factors
4. Affective reactions to work.

It is beyond the scope of this literature review to report on the entire body of work that investigates all of these factors. Instead, the focus will be on reasons for attrition that relate directly to the focus of the current research. This involves elements such as paperwork, meetings, case management and other tasks that may be categorized as the non-teaching professional responsibilities of the SET.

### *Excessive Paperwork, Stress, and Burnout*

One of the earliest studies to investigate this phenomenon surveyed the effects of six job related sources of stress among teachers of students with learning disabilities (Olson & Matuskey, 1982). The most often cited factor of stress and presumably the biggest threat to potential burnout was excessive paperwork. Seventy-eight percent of respondent replied that this was a source of tension at their job. This variable was cited more often than other, more publicized reasons for attrition such as inadequate salary and students discipline issues.

Similarly, a survey of 78 former SETs revealed that excessive paperwork was the number one reason for exiting the profession. Respondents were given a choice of 23 potential factors that may have had an impact in their decision for leaving. Once again, excessive paperwork was cited more frequently than pertaining to salary and discipline (Platt & Olson, 1990).

Several studies relate how these factors can play a part in teacher burnout, traditionally defined as “psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of accomplishment” (Maslach, 1982). Emrich (2001) surveyed 300 secondary teachers of students with learning disabilities and found that perceived workload (defined as paperwork, meetings, conferences and other non-teachings) was one of the highest predictors of burnout. A related factor which was also seen as a viable predictor of burnout was role conflict. This may be perceived as the discrepancy between what a teacher expects to do (teach) and what she actually does (non-teaching duties).

A parallel study on burnout surveyed a sample of 76 teachers of cross-categorical disabilities in self-contained classrooms (Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002). In this study, the size of a teacher’s caseload (and the amount of non-teaching duties associated with it) was not a statistically significant factor related to feelings of emotional exhaustion.

However, the authors mentioned that particular elements of the study support an argument for correlation. For example, the participant who had by far the largest caseload (22 students) also had the highest score on the emotional exhaustion scale.

Brownell, Smith, McNellis, and Miller (1997) used qualitative study to find why SETs left the classroom, where they go, and what, if any, incentives would motivate them to come back. They coded their respondents as “disgruntled,” “non-disgruntled,” and “unable to discern.”

Members coded as “disgruntled” (the largest sub-group) often cited overwhelming paperwork and the potential legalities associated with it as one of the factors that drove them out of the classroom. One ex-teacher summarized her frustrations when asked if there was anything that could be done to entice her back into teaching, “No, because of the excruciating paperwork, the necessity and redoing the paperwork for small errors [and] all the red tape. The system is failing the kids and because of that, I cannot support it.”

Another disgruntled participant relayed the toll that the non-teaching duties took on her:

There were too many preps I had to do...and too much paperwork. I had no aide. I was at school until 10:00 at night doing paperwork...I was lost, and I just felt like I was unprepared.

Over half of the 49 former special educators labeled “disgruntled” stated that they would not return to special education under any circumstance.

Dangal, Bunch, and Coopman (1987) sent out questionnaires to 30 former teachers of students with learning disabilities. Participants were asked to prioritize the top five reasons that contributed to their decision to leave the classroom. Some of the reasons detailed personal reasons such as family relocation. Others dealt with factors associated

with almost all teachers regardless of their specialty area such as desire for more money. The third set of reasons related to issues normally associated with special educators, such as too much paperwork. Although “marriage” was the most frequently cited top reason for leaving the field, “excessive paperwork” factored into the top five reasons of more respondents than any other. In this context, paperwork may not be perceived as the main reason for attrition, but it could be deemed “the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

#### *The Perceived Relevancy of Paperwork*

One reason why SETs dislike paperwork so much may be because they do not see value in it. Dudley-Marling (1985) surveyed 150 SETs regarding their perceptions on the usefulness of the IEP. Some of the more salient results were: 55% of respondents refer to students’ IEP less than once a month and less than a fourth believed it helped them plan daily instruction. Dudley-Marling states that the results of this survey support the idea that IEPs are viewed as formalities to be created and filed away, rather than the working documents of which they were originally intended.

#### *Role Conflict*

Another way that non-teaching professional duties can negatively manifest itself in the stress level of SETs is through role conflict. Sometimes called role dissonance, role conflict is associated with the discrepancy between what a worker believes are her primary duties, and those in which she is regularly engaged. These problems can be especially problematic for a SET who is in a position in which they believe that bureaucratic procedures take precedence over educating children with special needs.



For example, Billingsley et al., (2004) found in a survey of beginning special educators that 76% believed that routine duties and paperwork interfered to a moderate or great extent with their teaching. They also found that over a fourth of respondents that their workload was either not at all manageable or manageable to a small extent.

One survey was utilized to compare the intent to stay in the field for all special educators versus those who only teach students with emotional disabilities. The authors hoped to learn what, if any, unique factors contribute to the attrition rate of this subgroup. Role-related problems were among the most common variable for all participants. The authors found a negative correlation between role-related problems and job satisfaction (Singh & Billingsley, 1996) .

Billingsley and Cross, (1992) administered a survey to a random sample of general and special educators to explore what factors influenced their commitment, job satisfaction, and intent to stay in teaching. Questions that probed the factor “role conflict” originated from an established survey instrument that measured this variable called Rolecon (Rizzo, House & Lirtzman, 1970). It included prompts such as “I have to do things that should be done differently” and “I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.”

Role conflict was a significant predictor of job satisfaction for both general and SETs. As expected, special educators had a higher negative correlation coefficient between the two factors than did the general educators. Role conflict was also the greatest predictor in a SETs’ intent to leave teaching.

In a similar study, role conflict was negatively correlated to job satisfaction and job commitment among 542 Virginia special educators (Cross & Billingsley, 1994). The authors urged building administrators to be supportive and sensitive to the needs of their special educators as a method to combat attrition.

Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (2001) used path analysis to determine what factors contributed to SETs intent to stay in the field. This study differed from previous ones in two major ways. First, the authors actually followed up on respondents whom claimed they planned to leave the field. They found that 69% had actually left teaching.

The other way in which this project differed from others is that focused on the job as opposed to the worker. Variables such as moving, having children, or going back to school were not examined. The researchers stated that they were more interested in determining what parts of the work load could be altered to make it more desirable for any potential applicant.

The data collected from 887 SET in three large school districts reveal that role dissonance is a strong predictor of stress related to job design. Furthermore, there was a negative correlation between stress related to job design and satisfaction with current position and commitment to the profession.

#### *Effects of Excessive Paperwork on Special Education Subgroups*

It is evident that non-teaching professional duties has been considered a serious hurdle to both current and former special educators. However, what does the literature have to say about its effect on particular subgroups? Is it a consistent problem regardless

of particular demographics? Piotrowski and Plash (2006) explored the potential dichotomy between reasons for attrition for both fully certified and under-certified SETs. One hundred and seventeen SETs responded to a questionnaire that asked their opinion regarding eight different factors associated with teacher turnover.

Participants ranked each factor between 1 (not very influential) to 4 (very influential). The fully certified subgroup ranked “excessive paperwork” as their perceived most influential factor for teacher turnover. The under-certified group prioritized “excessive paperwork” as third most influential, behind “stress from demands of the job” and “school vision and mission.”

Another subgroup that is affected by the burden of excessive paperwork is general education teachers who are certified in special education. Billingsley and Cross, (1991) examined this untapped resource for new special educators to find out what prevented them from entering the field. A questionnaire asked participants to rate each of 19 possible reasons for not wanting to teach special education.

The reasons were grouped into three large categories: lack of support, student concerns, and administrative obstacles. Each reason was to be ranked between 1 (no deterrent) and 4 (major deterrent). The statement “too much paperwork” earned the highest rating among all listed reasons.

A national sample of teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing was contacted to determine what factors promote or inhibit job satisfaction (Luckner & Hanks, 2003). The 610 completed surveys reported which factors most significantly inhibited job satisfaction. “Amount of paperwork required” was considered the most

consistent threat to job satisfaction; it was labeled “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” by 68% of the sample. Teachers felt also very dissatisfied with “time for non-teaching responsibilities.” It ranked fourth, and was reported by 58% of those surveyed. These results show that similar to other special educators, dissatisfaction for these teachers is more often related to job-related tasks than to teaching, itself.

It is especially critical to understand why teachers of students with emotional disabilities leave the profession since they have the highest attrition rate of any teaching group (McLeskey et al., 2003). George, George, Gersten, and Grosenick (1995) surveyed 96 teachers of students with emotional disabilities. True to form, a full 36.5% of the sample planned on leaving during the upcoming school year. The authors found a statistically significant relationship between respondents perception of “inadequate time for paperwork” and a desire to leave or consider leaving teaching.

Furthermore, among all respondents, 26% felt that “completing required paperwork” was the most difficult aspect of their job. The authors comment that paperwork may be especially challenging for this subgroup of teachers because they have many additional paperwork-related tasks to complete such as: behavior goals, manifestation determination reports, and communications with community agencies.

### *Summary and Suggestions for Future Research*

The literature shows that paperwork and related instructional demands are responsible for a considerable amount of stress, frustration, and confusion among SETs. These negative attributes may be exacerbated among beginners to the profession who are

still learning the fundamentals. Added pressure associated with bureaucratic procedures may be too much for many novice teachers to handle.

Future research would benefit from investigating how to best prepare beginning teachers to meet these demands of the job. The topic of paperwork and what it entails should be more clearly developed in SET preparation programs. IEP simulations, goal-writing workshop, and other activities hold the potential to give future teachers a better understanding of what is expected of them.

Researchers should also determine which types of professional support systems best meet the needs of first year SETs in regards to paperwork. Model programs of support and mentorship should be examined and shared with interested school districts.

### 3. Methodology

#### Participants

A random national sample of 2000 public-school SETs with five or less years of experience were invited to participate in the survey. Teachers of students with gifts and talents were excluded from this survey, since that subgroup is not legally responsible for the same amount of paperwork.

Invitational postcards were sent to the school address of participants. Approximately one week later, email invitations with a link to the survey were sent to participants' school email account. Accurate address and email lists were generated and sent out through MDR (Market Data Retrieval). MDR is a national market research firm focused specifically on the education profession. Due to recent spam legislation, market research firms are not permitted to release email addresses, but rather serve as the distributor of the communication.

Eighteen willing participants were contacted for a follow-up phone interview. Diversity of opinion and experiences were crucial in the selection of follow-up phone interview candidates. It was important to report on a wide variety of beginning SETs to accurately triangulate the findings of the survey.

## Justification of Research Methodology

The research questions presented by this study were addressed through a mixed methods approach. An internet-based survey was sent out to the entire sample of beginning teachers. The follow-up phone interviews were conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the circumstances that affect the morale of the first- year SET.

The mixed-methods approach for this study was designed to allow two prominent forms of research to make unique and complimentary contributions to the knowledge base. The large scale survey attempted to answer the questions “who” and “what,” while the interviews examined “why” and “how.” The combination of the two brought a more refined understanding of the problem that would not be obtainable in isolation.

## Survey Construction

Most of the research questions associated with this study were best addressed through the use of a survey. The purpose of survey research is to “describe specific characteristics of a group of persons, objects, or institutions” (Jaeger, 1988). This methodology supports the exploration and analysis of a potential relationship between paperwork, morale and select demographics.

The survey was administered and analyzed via a reputable online survey software package provided by George Mason University. Administering a survey online has many advantages over its paper and pencil counterpart. Online surveys are economical, efficient, encourage anonymity, and have the ability to ask a variety of different question formats (Sue & Ritter, 2007).

The most significant disadvantages of online surveys (Sue & Ritter, 2007) were acknowledged and addressed. The disadvantage of unfamiliarity with or lack of access to computers was not considered a stumbling block, since the target population of beginning public school teachers are usually regarded as technologically savvy based on previous college, work and home experiences. Likewise, computer availability was not perceived as a liability for this population. The results of a recent national survey by the U.S. Department of Commerce (2000) revealed that “nearly all public school teachers have access to computers at school.”

Another potential disadvantage of online surveys was a threat to the homogeneity of appearance or function based on differing web browsers. A sample survey was retrieved using three different web browsers, Windows Internet Explorer 7, Netscape Navigator 9, and Firefox 2. No omission or distortion of data was found using any of the browsers.

Unnecessarily lengthy or confusing questions pose a third threat to online surveys. If a respondent feels that a questionnaire takes up too much time or if she does not understand what is expected of her, it may be abandoned. Based on preliminary survey findings, participants responded that it took on average 15 minutes to complete. Reported areas of ambiguity were addressed and changed as needed. Further details regarding these changes are found within the “preliminary survey feedback” heading of this chapter.

Although it is impossible to guarantee that each participant completed the survey only one time, or that an individual with non-targeted demographics may have completed



the survey, there were safeguard in place to allow for minimal error. The introductory letters explicitly stated the targeted demographics for participation in the survey. It also reminded participants to only complete the survey one time.

Furthermore, the survey was set up to limit response selections to those that support the intent of the survey. For example, for the “years of experience” question, a participant was limited to answer 1 through 5. This would serve as an additional “red flag” to a seasoned special educator who might have been inadvertently invited to complete the questionnaire.

#### Web-Based Survey Response Rate

There is limited data on acceptable response rates for web-based surveys (Dillman, 2007). One study (Kaplowitz, Hadlock & Levine, 2004) that compared the response rates of a postal survey versus an identical electronic survey revealed a slightly higher response rate for the paper version (.32 versus .30). However, the fiscal cost per response for a postal survey (\$10.97) far overshadowed that of the electronic one (\$1.31). Therefore, the added expenses of a paper survey were not justifiable for such a slight increase in response rate. This study utilized principles of the Tailored Design Method (Dillman 2007), a research-based set of proven practices as described below.

#### Survey Implementation and Procedures

The Tailored Design Method is a philosophical and practical set of techniques used to create a sense of trust with respondents, along with a perception of increased rewards and decreased costs. There are several factors taken into account to make the

response rate as high as possible, while at the same time decrease survey error as much as possible,

Trust was established in several ways. A token of appreciation for completion of the survey was highlighted in the introductory email. A link to a teachers' freebies website ([http://freebies.about.com/od/teacherfreebies/Teacher\\_Freebies.htm](http://freebies.about.com/od/teacherfreebies/Teacher_Freebies.htm)) was provided upon completion of the instrument. To acknowledge the significance and legitimacy of the survey, the George Mason University logo was prominently affixed to all correspondence and the survey, itself. Furthermore, contact information was provided in case a respondent had questions or comments for the researcher, the dissertation adviser, or the university human subjects review board.

The efforts, opinions, and experiences of participants were acknowledged in several ways. The initial postcard attempted to establish a rapport with the teacher by explaining the purpose of the research and some background information about the researcher. By acknowledging that, he too, is currently a full-time SET, it was hoped that the respondents would be more eager to help out one of their own. Further examples of increased reward included an expression of gratitude with all correspondence, acknowledging the importance of the respondents' data, and offering to share the results with any interested party at the conclusion of the study.

Participant costs were minimized partially by the choice of completing the survey online. Completion of the survey was relatively convenient and simple. The preliminary survey findings determined that the survey took, on average, 15 minutes to complete. Costs were further minimized by explaining in detail at the beginning of the survey, what

it entailed, perceived benefits and risks, how to give consent, and who to contact with specific questions or concerns.

To promote confidentiality, the consent section informed participants that data would be coded and only the researcher would be able to match a respondent with the corresponding data. Participants were reminded to exit their browser at the conclusion of the survey.

In order to maximize the number of returned surveys, two communications were sent out to all 2,000 members of the sample. An initial postcard (Appendix B) sent out to the school address encouraged participants to check their email over the next few days for an invitation to take part in a dissertation survey for beginning SETs. A printed link to the web survey was provided, in case the email did not arrive. Approximately three days later, a letter (Appendix C) arrived to their school email account describing the purpose of the survey, and explaining what was expected of the participant. The bottom of the email included a direct link to the live survey online. A follow-up email was originally planned to be sent out as a reminder to all participants two weeks after the first one arrived. However, this additional communication was found to be too cost-prohibitive.

### Survey Content

All aspects of the research were submitted to the George Mason Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) for approval. All HSRB revisions were completed before the start of the survey. The first portion of the survey included the required wording and details in accordance with HSRB policies. Research purpose, risks, benefits, confidentiality, participation, contact information, and consent were all addressed. After reading the

notice of consent, respondents had to click the “I agree” button in order to be eligible for the participation.

In addition to the initial consent information, the survey called for forty-nine responses. The response mode most often used was Likert-scaled multiple choice ( $n = 27$ ), followed by open-ended questions ( $n = 9$ ), yes-no questions ( $n = 6$ ), demographic description type multiple choice ( $n = 4$ ), and check all that apply ( $n = 3$ ). The body of the survey consisted of four sub-sections. The four sub-sections were current demographics, first-year teaching demographics, paperwork demands of SETs, and morale.

The “current demographics” section consisted of six questions. The questions probed standard participant descriptors such as sex, age, and race. The purpose of this section was to describe the dominant characteristics of the sample, as well as to determine if a potential connection existed between teacher demographics and morale.

The “first year demographics” section consisted of eight questions. These prompts required a respondent to recall and report information about their first year of teaching such as grade levels taught, disabilities of student taught, and whether or not they considered themselves a career switcher. The purposes of this section were the same as the first (to collect descriptive data and to probe a possible correlation between teacher demographics and morale.) To avoid potential confusion, this cluster of demographic data was separated from the previous one because it asked about the past, rather than the present.

The penultimate section, “paperwork demands of special education teachers,” was made up of fifteen inquiries. The directions for this sub-group explained that the

respondent should only include paperwork “specifically associated with special education such as writing IEPs, behavior management plans and long term goals” and not that which is “normally associated with all teachers such as grading tests or creating lesson plans.”

The participant was initially asked about her attitudes toward excessive paperwork and to what degree that she felt that it presented a problem for the beginning special education teacher. Next, a participant cited the number of IEPs that she wrote as well as an estimate of the amount of minutes spent per week on paperwork during her first year.

Prevalent feedback from a focus group revealed that many participants found it very challenging to estimate the number of minutes spent per week on paperwork because of wide fluctuations throughout the school year. For this reason, the national average of 300 minutes per week, as determined by research from the U.S. Department of Education (Carlson et al., 2003) was included as a point of reference.

In addition, the paperwork subgroup section asked if a participant’s employer assigned less paperwork to novice teachers and to what degree such a policy might have been helpful. Participants were also asked to report the helpfulness of common support systems such as mentors or administrators in regards to meeting the paperwork demands of their jobs.

There were a total of twenty questions in the final section of the survey, “morale.” For the purposes of this research, morale was subdivided into three distinct constructs, job satisfaction, job stress, and commitment to the profession (Described on the survey as

“intent to leave the profession”). Questions focused on the circumstances surrounding only the first year in the classroom. The ten prompts for the “job satisfaction” section originated from the work of Billingsley (Billingsley & Cross, 1992, Cross & Billingsley, 1994, Littrell, Billingsley & Cross, 1994). The format was used to gauge the level of job satisfaction of current and former SETs in several different settings.

The nine “job stress” and one “commitment to the profession” questions were also originally based directly on Billingsley’s work. However, upon further consideration and consultation with both the members of the exploratory feedback exercise and experienced researchers, the questions were changed. It was suggested that the prompts could be better balanced to avoid a possibility of leading the respondent. Whereas previously, all nine job stress questions had a negative “spin” to them, they were now split up between five negative statements, (e.g., work-related stress made me physically sick), and four positive ones, (e.g., I engaged in exercise or another form of physical activity to deal with job-related stress). An open-ended prompt followed that asked respondents to cite what one factor helped them to best cope with job-stress during their first year, and why.

Internal consistency within the job satisfaction and job stress subsections were evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha. Responses to negative statements were scored and responses to positive statements were reverse scored.

The “commitment to the profession” prompt was revised to give respondents more choices regarding if and when they planned to quit. In addition, a new choice was added for individuals who may want to leave education, but want to continue to work with people with disabilities.

## Preliminary Survey Feedback

An initial version of the online survey was presented to a class of 16 graduate-level special education majors at George Mason University. The majority of these students were also beginning full-time SETs, therefore their demographics were similar to the study's intended population.

Participants completed the survey online as part of a class activity regarding special education research. They were asked to give both written and oral feedback regarding how long the survey took to complete, what aspects of the survey needed further clarification, and whether or not they would actually complete the survey if it was sent to them in its current form.

The assessment was generally positive. On average, participants reported that it took 15 minutes to complete. When asked, all participants believed that the survey was of a reasonable length. It was agreed that the survey could be easily completed in one sitting.

Two areas of the survey needed further clarification for a majority of the respondents. The term "non-instructional duties" was found to be too ambiguous, despite the inclusion of examples on the survey. This term was changed to "paperwork," which was a more concrete concept for the participants.

As stated previously, it was found that participants found it especially challenging to estimate the amount of time spent on paperwork. Respondents stated that they were much more comfortable committing to an amount after learning that the national average was 300 minutes per week (Carlson et al., 2003).

## Follow-up Interviews

Eighteen participants who volunteered contact information were contacted for a more extensive phone interview. Participants were selected based on the diversity of their demographic data, in order to get a well-rounded perspective of the opinions and experiences of the entire sample. The interview phase of the study concluded after participant responses became largely redundant and no new themes were established.

The purposes of the qualitative research, as they relate to this study, are exploratory and explanatory (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Important variables that affect a teacher's ability to handle paperwork demands such education, experiences, skills and dispositions were identified. Once identified, a casual relationship was explored between the presence or absence of key variables and a participant's morale, as defined by the study.

Beyond initial introductory questions and comments, the telephone interview consisted of five main clusters (Appendix D) that served as a springboard for discussion and follow-up prompts.

## Interview Data Collection

The researcher documented the participant's responses on paper, as the interview proceeded. The telephone interview was not recorded electronically, to promote confidentiality. Instead, the researcher asked for clarification as needed. After the conclusion of the interview, the researcher immediately transferred the data to a word-processing program where it was later reviewed and analyzed in more detail.



## Data Analysis

The survey website had the capabilities to compile simple descriptive data. For example, it could report the number of surveys returned, the number and percentage of responses attributed to each question, and a list of the qualitative responses for each open-ended prompt.

More sophisticated analysis was utilized through the use of SPSS statistical software. Means and standard deviations were determined for the number of IEPs assigned to a teacher, the amount of time spent on paperwork, and the estimate of time that could be spent on instructional purposes if a school had a reduced paperwork policy.

Correlation coefficients ( $r$ ) were calculated for the amount of time spent on paperwork and the means of the morale subgroup in order to address the research question of whether or not a connection exists between paperwork demands and morale. In the same vein, the correlation coefficient was calculated between the number of IEPs written during the first year and means of the morale subgroups.

T-tests were calculated on the morale scores of new and experienced teachers. The researcher used the results to determine if a possible difference exists in the amount of job stress and job satisfaction during that first year. Differences were also used to help determine if the first year is truly as stressful and disheartening as new teachers report, or if time and experience gives them a different perspective on the beginning of their career.

The open-ended responses of all participants, as well as the interview transcripts were analyzed in a similar fashion. The qualitative data was evaluated and reported using an issues-focus analysis (Weiss, 1994). First, the data was coded according to categories

and concepts that were later determined. Coded material was then sorted, according to similar themes and recurring elements. Lastly, data was integrated into a cohesive narrative form.

Detailed records of communication, contact logs, and coding methodology was collected and organized in an easily retrievable format. In order to promote criteria of soundness associated with qualitative research (Marshall & Rosman, 1995), fellow researchers will have access to data if the findings are contested or there is a request for reanalysis of the findings.

## 4. Results

### Scoring and Technical Adequacy of the Survey

The survey had a total of 25 items that were used to measure the perceived helpfulness and morale of participants. The items were divided among four subscales that addressed more specific aspects. The four subscales were, “perceived helpfulness,” “job satisfaction,” “job stress,” and “commitment to the profession.”

#### *Perceived Helpfulness Scale*

Respondents were required to rate the degree of helpfulness for seven variables as they pertained to completing first year paperwork responsibilities. Cronbach’s alpha was calculated to assess reliability of the items ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Respondents rated each variable as either “very unhelpful,” “unhelpful,” “helpful,” or “very helpful.” For coding and analysis purposes, each statement was assigned a numerical value between 1 and 4. Higher score were associated with a higher degree of perceived helpfulness. Members of the sample were instructed to leave blank any variable that did not pertain to them. The scores of the variables were summed to create a total perceived helpfulness score. This score was used as the basis for comparing levels of perceived helpfulness between various sub-samples in the study.

In Table 1, each variable is listed from most to least helpful among the entire sample. Members of the sample cited other school workers, such as co-teachers, department heads, and mentors, to be most helpful.

Table 1

*Helpfulness Scale: Items, Means, and Standard Deviations*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Other teachers	173	3.17	.82
Department head	159	2.96	.99
Mentor	147	2.93	1.03
Student teaching	136	2.90	1.00
College courses	163	2.70	.83
Administrators	176	2.50	.94
Induction program	133	2.41	.95
Total perceived helpfulness score	84	19.86	4.44

*Job Satisfaction Scale*

Respondents were required to rate the level of job satisfaction associated with nine variables during their first year in the classroom. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to

assess reliability of the items ( $\alpha = .78$ ). Respondents rated each variable as either “very dissatisfied,” “dissatisfied,” “satisfied,” or “very satisfied.” For coding and analysis purposes, each statement was assigned a numerical value between 1 and 4. Higher scores were associated with a higher degree of job satisfaction. Members of the sample were instructed to leave blank any variable that did not pertain to them. The scores of the variables were summed to create a total job satisfaction score. This score was used as the basis for comparing levels of job satisfaction between various sub-samples in the study.

In Table 2, each variable is listed from most to least satisfactory among the entire sample. Members of the sample found intangible variables such as feelings of pride and importance to be more satisfactory than tangibles such as salary or working conditions.

Table 2

*Job Satisfaction Scale: Variables, Means, and Standard Deviations*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pride and respect from family and friends	176	3.46	.65
Relationship with colleagues	176	3.15	.75
Importance and challenge	175	3.14	.62
Job security and permanence	176	3.04	.80
Opportunity for developing new skills	173	2.97	.72
Supervisors(s)	176	2.90	.91
Opportunity to use past training and skills	173	2.77	.66
Working conditions	174	2.73	.81
Salary and fringe benefits	176	2.70	.73
Total job satisfaction score	169	27.01	4.02

*Job Stress Scale*

Respondents were presented with a list of eight statements related to job stress. Four statements were presented negatively, such as, “I carried school problems home with me.” The other four were presented positively, such as, “My sense of humor helped

me to cope with stress at work.” Respondents rated how often each statement applied to them during their first year in the classroom.

Each statement was associated with five choices, “almost never,” “occasionally,” “fairly often,” “frequently,” and “almost always.” Choices were then coded from one to five. Positively worded statements were reverse coded from five to one. Members of the sample were instructed to leave blank any variable that did not pertain to them. Higher scores were associated with a higher level of job stress among the entire sample.

Cronbach’s alpha for the eight variables was  $\alpha = .55$ , however when the variable, “I discussed topics that upset me at work with family, friends, or co-workers” was removed from calculations, the level rose to  $\alpha = .71$ . All eight variables were ultimately included in analysis to maintain the integrity of the survey. The eight scores were then summed to create a total job stress score. This score was used to compare levels of job stress between various sub samples. In Table 3, each variable is listed from most to least stressful among the entire sample. Five of the eight stressors were reported as occurring at least “fairly often” ( $M \geq 2.50$ ). Hence, members of the sample reported significant sources and amounts of stress during their first year.

Table 3

*Job Stress Scale: Variables, Means, and Standard Deviations*

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I carried school problems home with me.	176	3.30	1.36
*I did not engage in exercise or another form of physical activity to deal with job-related stress.	177	3.29	1.31
My work made me frustrated.	176	3.05	1.18
The amount of work I had to do interfered with how well it got done.	176	2.71	1.27
*I did not regularly discuss topics that upset me at work with family, friends, or co-workers.	175	2.50	1.24
*I did not look forward to going to work.	177	2.39	1.22
*My sense of humor did not help me to cope with stress at work.	177	2.11	1.00
Work-related stress made me physically sick.	176	1.86	1.24
Total job stress score	170	18.80	5.18

*\*The original phrasing of these survey statements can be found on pages 149-51.*

*Commitment to the Profession Prompt*

Respondents were provided with a list of six choices and asked to select the statement that best described their future plans as a special education teacher. The six choices were:



1. I plan to find a new job, as soon as possible, unrelated to either education or helping people with disabilities.

2. I plan to transfer, as soon as possible, to a job related to general education.

3. I plan to find a new job, as soon as possible, helping people with disabilities, but unrelated to education.

4. I plan to stay in special education unless a significantly better opportunity comes along.

5. I plan to remain a special education teacher until I retire.

6. I plan to take on some type of leadership role related to the field, such as a department head, college professor, or director of special education.

For the purposes of coding, analysis and comparison among sub-samples, the six variables were assigned an ascending numerical value between 1 and 6. Higher numbers were associated with more reported dedication to and likelihood to remain in the profession. A total of 175 respondents completed the item. Respondents reported a very high level of commitment to the field of special education. The sample's mean score was 4.54 and the standard deviation was 1.20. Table 4 shows the percentage and number of respondents associated with each variable.

Table 4

*SETs Current Plans Regarding Commitment to the Field of Special Education*

Response	%	<i>n</i>
I plan to find a new job, unrelated to either education or helping people with disabilities.	1%	2
I plan to transfer, as soon as possible, to a job related to general education.	7%	12
I plan to find a new job, as soon as possible, helping people with disabilities, but unrelated to education.	2%	3
I plan to stay in special education unless a significantly better opportunity comes along.	42%	74
I plan to remain a special education teacher until I retire.	20%	35
I plan to take on some type of leadership role related to the field such as a department head, college professor, or director of special ed.	28%	49
Total	100%	175

Final Sample

*Survey Respondents*

The final survey sample consisted of 177 respondents. This represents a response rate of approximately 9%, with a margin of error of 7%, within a 95% confidence

interval. Although this response rate is relatively low, there are numerous contributing factors that help support the validity of the findings.

For example, the 2000 beginning special education teachers invited to participate were randomly selected from all across the United States. The final count had representatives from 30 different states. By including a randomized sample from diverse locations, respondent data was more likely to reflect the needs, experiences, and opinions of the average, beginning special educator.

In order to strengthen the credibility that survey respondents accurately represented the population at large, demographics were compared to a similar study with a much larger sample. In 2002, the Study for Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) published a large scale study that explored the characteristics, qualifications, and experiences of beginning SETs. A comparison between the two studies is displayed in Table 5.

Table 5

*Demographic Comparison with Previous SPeNSE Study*

Demographic	Percent of current study	Percent of SPeNSE study
Female	81%	78%
White	85%	86%
Masters degree	25%	21%

These three key demographics, gender, race, and education level, are very similar between the studies. This comparison is given to provide additional confidence that members of the current study accurately represent the characteristics and opinions of the entire beginning SET population.

The follow-up interviews served as a third method to increase the validity of the survey sample. Almost ten percent ( $n = 18$ ) of individuals participated in in-depth, follow-up telephone interviews. Detailed commentary from these participants was used to supplement, clarify, and triangulate the initial findings.

To improve clarification, the term “respondent” will be used to denote when a participant provided data via the online survey. “Interviewee” will refer to those whom provided data via the follow-up telephone interviews.

#### *Follow-Up Interviews*

Sixty survey participants (34%) offered to be contacted for a follow-up telephone interview. Demographics and responses among the members of this group were examined in order to draw from a diverse subsection. A total of 18 beginning teachers were interviewed in the manner described in the methodology chapter.

Participants’ comments were deconstructed in order to gain implicit meaning within the text (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Interviews were transcribed and collapsed into a coding matrix (Maxwell, 2005). Relevant themes were analyzed within the matrix

An example of this procedure would be the inclusion of quotations from three different participants, One mentioned “paperwork means having no time for a social life,”

another said, “staying at school until dinner time to finish IEPs is a regular occurrence,” and a third stated that she was “grateful that she did not yet have children to compete for her time that she devoted to paperwork at home.” These three quotations were then aligned to the major theme, “Completing paperwork beyond the school day and/or personal life sacrifices.”

The transcripts were then independently reviewed by an individual familiar with both special education and social science research techniques. The emergent themes were then discussed and modified to improve reliability.

Ten major themes emerged from the transcripts. The themes were:

- a.) Prior IEP experience as a paraprofessional or parent of a special needs child
- b.) Use and abuse of technology
- c.) First impressions of the paperwork burden
- d.) Paperwork help and training, or lack thereof, from college courses
- e.) Paperwork help and training, or lack thereof, from peers
- f.) Paperwork help and training, or lack thereof, from school leaders
- g.) Learning by doing and on the job training
- h.) Completing paperwork beyond the school day and/or personal life sacrifices
- i.) Paperwork advice for special education majors
- j.) How paperwork interferes with teaching

### *Organization of Results*

The quantitative and qualitative results of this study are presented in a blended manner according to relevant headings associated with the study. Data is not provided in

isolation, but rather in conjunction with all related findings. This presentation style addresses the strengths of the mixed methods research approach in its ability to triangulate major findings and to address perceived differences. The results of this study are presented within the following subheadings, a.) demographics of respondents, b.) the paperwork burden, c.) morale.

### Demographics of Respondents

#### *Gender and Race*

The gender and race demographics of this survey were very similar to previous studies that described beginning SETs. Eighty one percent ( $n = 144$ ) of the sample was female. Eighty five percent ( $n = 151$ ) was white. Conversely, only one African-American male and two Hispanic males returned the survey. These results reflected the ongoing challenges of racial and gender disparity between the majority of special education teachers and their students. Table 6 shows the specific racial/ethnicity distribution of the sample.

Table 6

*Racial Distribution of Survey Respondents*

Race/ethnicity	%	<i>n</i>
White, non-Hispanic	85%	151
African-American	8%	14
Hispanic	5%	9
Native American	1%	2
Asian American	1%	1
Other/No answer	0%	0
Total	100%	177

*Age, Career Switchers, and Amount of Experience*

The age of respondents ranged from 22 to 64 years old, with a median age of 34 ( $SD = 9.38$ ). The median age in this study is more than ten years older than a traditional college graduate. Therefore, the presence and contributions of career switchers or “late bloomers” among the sample should not be overlooked.

Thirty one percent ( $n = 54$ ) of respondents considered themselves career switchers. Many of these individuals reported that previous work experiences prepared them for the demands of special education and its accompanying paperwork. For example, one beginning teacher stated, “I think that it helps that I was in the business

world for over twenty years. I managed a grocery store and I became anal about paperwork in that environment.”

An interviewee explained how his prior job as a soldier prepared him to complete paperwork and other, less desirable, facets of his job:

I have the mindset that it is just something that you have to do. It comes with the territory. I think it helps that my first career was in the military. There are a lot of teachers in my school that were originally in the military. I think we better adapt at doing things we don't necessarily always like to do.

Several career switchers made the transition from special education paraprofessional to special education teacher. Their comments were largely positive about the advancement in their career. Many explained that the paperwork did not surprise or frustrate them, because for the most part, they knew what they were getting into ahead of time.

One participant stated, “I think being a teacher's assistant has been my main advantage. I got to see firsthand what teachers did and how they did it.”

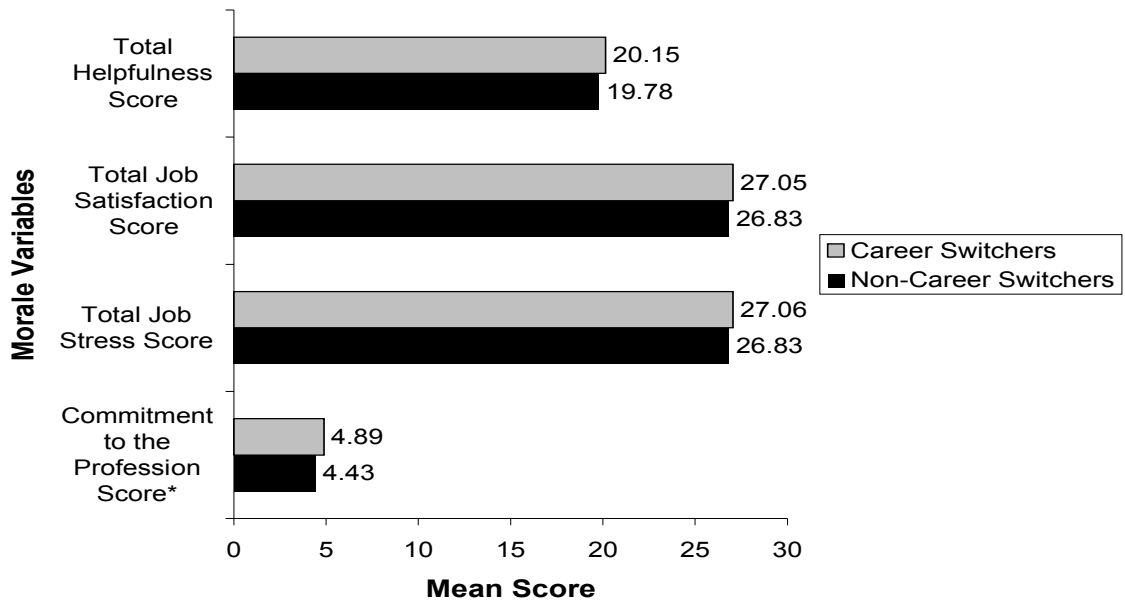
Another explained how she became good at her job by avoiding other people's errors:

I worked as a paraprofessional for nine years. That was where I was able to learn most what being a special education teacher was all about. I would learn from other teachers' mistakes. I'd think, “I'd never do that in my classroom.”

Although the comments and opinions of career switchers were largely optimistic, their morale scores were not found to be much different from the rest of the sample.



Figure 1 shows the mean morale scores in four key categories comparing career switchers and non-career switchers. Members of the two sub-groups reported very similar scores. The one exception is in the “commitment to the profession” sub-score. Career switchers reported statistically significant higher scores ( $t = 2.371, p = .019$ ).



\**T*- tests revealed a statistically significant difference in mean scores ( $t = 2.371, p = .019$ ) in “commitment to the profession” score.

*Figure 1.* Select morale scores comparison between career switchers and non-career switchers.

Table 7 provides the descriptive data for career switchers versus non-career switchers and corresponding *t*-tests which were employed to determine whether differences were significant. Independent sample *t*-tests were completed using career

switchers versus non-career switchers on the total subscale scores perceived helpfulness, job satisfaction, job stress, and commitment to the profession.

Opinions were very similar among the two groups. Only four of the 28 comparisons revealed a statistically significant difference. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that whenever multiple statistical comparisons are made between subgroups, the researcher must accept the possibility of a Type I error.

Table 7

*Comparison of Morale Variables between Career Switchers and Non-Career Switchers*

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Perceived Helpfulness</i>				
1. Other teachers				
Career Switchers	54	3.15 (.86)		
Non-Career Switchers	118	3.19 (.81)	-.346	.730
2. Department Head				
Career Switchers	51	3.04 (1.03)		
Non-Career Switchers	107	2.92 (.92)	.729	.467
3. Mentor				
Career Switchers	46	2.87 (1.13)		
Non-Career Switchers	101	2.96 (.98)	-.497	.620
4. Student Teaching				
Career Switchers	36	2.83 (1.13)		
Non-Career Switchers	99	2.92 (.94)	-.406	.686
5. College Courses				
Career Switchers	45	2.73 (.86)		
Non-Career Switchers	117	2.68 (.83)	.338	.736
6. Administrators				
Career Switchers	54	2.44 (1.00)		
Non-Career Switchers	121	2.53 (.91)	-.548	.584
7. Induction Program				
Career Switchers	40	2.53 (.96)		
Non-Career Switchers	93	2.37 (.94)	.890	.375
8. Total Helpfulness Score				
Career Switchers	20	20.15 (5.40)		
Non-Career Switchers	64	19.78 (4.13)	.281	.781

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Job Satisfaction</i>				
1. Pride and respect from family and friends				
Career Switchers	54	3.41 (.74)		
Non-Career Switchers	121	3.48 (.61)	-.676	.500
2. Relationship with colleagues				
Career Switchers	54	3.15 (.68)		
Non-Career Switchers	121	3.17 (.78)	-.140	.889
3. Importance and challenge				
Career Switchers	54	3.13 (.65)		
Non-Career Switchers	120	3.15 (.60)	-.202	.840
4. Job security and permanence				
Career Switchers	54	2.89 (.79)		
Non-Career Switchers	121	3.10 (.79)	-1.625	.106
5. Opportunity for developing new skills				
Career Switchers	53	3.04 (.78)		
Non-Career Switchers	119	2.93 (.70)	.877	.382
6. Supervisors(s)				
Career Switchers	54	3.13 (.77)		
Non-Career Switchers	121	2.79 (.95)	2.463	.015*
7. Opportunity to use past training and skills				
Career Switchers	54	2.81 (.70)		
Non-Career Switchers	120	2.74 (.64)	.675	.500
8. Working conditions				
Career Switchers	54	2.80 (.83)		
Non-Career Switchers	119	2.69 (.80)	.807	.421
9. Salary and fringe benefits				
Career Switchers	54	2.69 (.72)		
Non-Career Switchers	121	2.70 (.74)	-.144	.886

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
10. Total job satisfaction score				
Career Switchers	53	27.05 (4.21)		
Non-Career Switchers	115	26.83 (3.97)	.343	.732
<i>Job Stress</i>				
1. I carried school problems home with me				
Career Switchers	54	2.96 (1.39)		
Non-Career Switchers	121	3.44 (1.32)	-2.163	.032*
2. I did not engage in exercise or another form of physical activity to deal with job-related stress.				
Career Switchers	54	3.46 (1.23)		
Non-Career Switchers	122	3.22 (1.33)	1.129	.261
3. My work made me frustrated				
Career Switchers	53	2.81 (1.19)		
Non-Career Switchers	122	3.14 (1.17)	-1.697	.091
4. The amount of work I had to do interfered with how well it got done				
Career Switchers	54	2.63 (1.41)		
Non-Career Switchers	121	2.75 (1.22)	-.593	.561
5. I did not regularly discuss topics that upset me at work with family, friends, or co-workers.				
Career Switchers	54	2.81 (1.21)		
Non-Career Switchers	120	2.37 (1.24)	2.224	.027*
6. I did not look forward to going to work				
Career Switchers	54	2.43 (1.28)		
Non-Career Switchers	122	2.38 (1.20)	.243	.808
7. My sense of humor did not help me to cope with stress at work.				
Career Switchers	54	2.15 (1.00)		
Non-Career Switchers	122	2.09 (1.01)	.325	.725

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
8. Work-related stress made me physically sick.				
Career Switchers	53	1.68 (.96)		
Non-Career Switchers	122	1.93 (1.20)	-1.379	.170
9. Total job stress score				
Career Switchers	53	27.06 (4.21)		
Non-Career Switchers	115	26.83 (3.97)	-.627	.531
<i>Commitment to the Profession</i>				
1. Reported dedication and likelihood to stay in the profession.				
Career Switchers	53	4.89 (1.03)		
Non-Career Switchers	122	4.43 (1.24)	2.371	.019*

There was a fairly even distribution of years experience reported by respondents. The largest number of teachers had three years experience and the smallest number had one. Table 8 displays the specific breakdown of years reported by the entire sample.

Table 8

*Number of Years Experience Reported By Survey Respondents*

Years experience	%	<i>n</i>
1	10%	18
2	22%	39
3	31%	54
4	19%	33
5	15%	27
No answer	3%	6
Total	100%	177

Many of the relatively more experienced teachers were eager to share their struggles during their first year in the classroom. Some of these struggles revolved around realizing how unprepared they were for their job, or the types of unrealistic expectations that were placed upon them.

For example, a third year Spanish teacher was only hired on the condition that she also teach special education part time. With no previous special education training or experience, she felt that she was totally unprepared for what was expected of her:

I don't think the principal actually realized how little I knew about what I was doing. It was about March of my first year when another teacher asked me if I could let her borrow the IEP for one of my students. I replied, "What's an IEP?"

Nobody told me ahead of time what they were or how to do them. At this point, a colleague sat down with me and we knocked out twenty of them in a week's time. I am not a dumb person, so it didn't take me long once I figured out what I was doing.

A participant explained how first year teachers in her district were expected to take on extra-curricular duties, and how these additional responsibilities prevented her from devoting more time and energy to her teaching obligations:

I was strongly encouraged to help coach cheerleading my first year. New teachers are expected to pitch in around the school and take on extra responsibilities if they want to be hired. The cheerleading practice was just one more thing that took up time that first year and kept me from doing my best.

Teachers were clearly able to reflect upon the specific problems that they encountered during their first year. For the most part, they were eager to share these stories, and they hoped that others could learn from their mistakes and misunderstandings.

### *Education and Certification*

Prior to their first day in the classroom, the highest level of education for the majority of the beginning SETs was a bachelor's degree (73%,  $n = 129$ ). Another 25% of respondents ( $n = 44$ ) earned a master's degree prior to teaching. Four respondents (2%) reported "other" as level of education. Explanations of "other" included a second master's degrees, work toward a doctorate, and a law degree.



A majority (60%,  $n = 106$ ) of teachers reported that they had completed all requirements for a professional special education teaching license prior to their first day in the classroom. However, when asked if they were initially “highly qualified” as defined by “No Child Left Behind,” only 45% ( $n = 80$ ) stated that they were. Eighteen percent ( $n = 31$ ) reported that they were uncertain whether or not they were “highly qualified” prior to employment. This suggests that not all beginning teachers are fully aware of the criteria necessary to gain this status.

Although the intention of the “highly qualified” label is to ensure a teacher’s mastery of skills and knowledge in the classroom, it may not be enough to contribute to the improved morale of a teacher. Figure 2 shows the mean morale scores in four key categories comparing highly qualified (HQ) and non-highly qualified (non-HQ) respondents. No statistically significant differences were found.

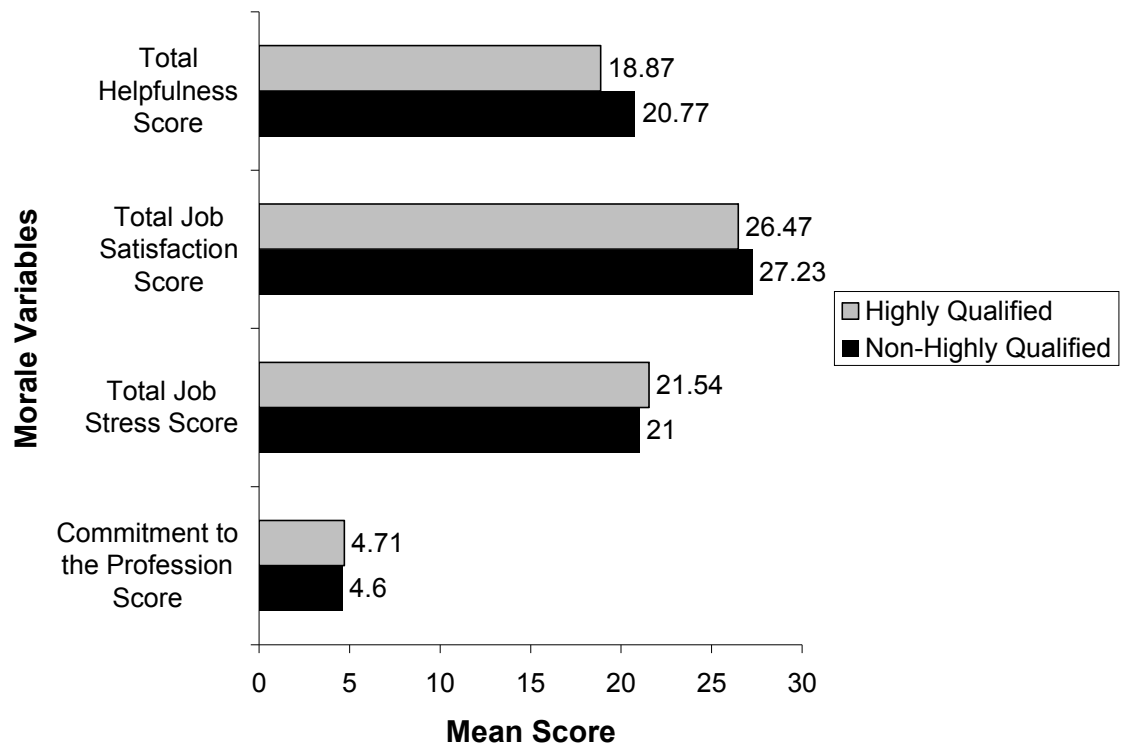


Figure 2. Select morale scores comparison between HQ and non-HQ respondents.

Table 9 provides the descriptive data for highly qualified versus non-highly qualified first-year special education teachers and corresponding t-tests which were employed to determine whether differences were significant. Independent sample t-tests were completed using on the total subscale scores perceived helpfulness, job satisfaction, job stress, and commitment to the profession. Only two of 28 comparisons were found to have a statistically significant difference.

Table 9

*Comparison of Morale Variables between Highly Qualified and Non-Highly Qualified First Year Special Education Teachers*

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Perceived Helpfulness</i>				
1. Other teachers				
Highly qualified	58	3.02 (1.01)		
Non-highly qualified	75	3.18 (.78)	-.058	.954
2. Department Head				
Highly qualified	69	2.84 (1.10)		
Non-highly qualified	63	3.02 (1.04)	-.811	.419
3. Mentor				
Highly qualified	62	2.74 (1.13)		
Non-highly qualified	58	2.96 (1.02)	-1.420	.158
4. Student Teaching				
Highly qualified	66	2.88 (.97)		
Non-highly qualified	44	3.16 (.89)	-1.536	.127
5. College Courses				
Highly qualified	76	2.66 (.76)		
Non-highly qualified	59	2.81 (.94)	.338	.736
6. Administrators				
Highly qualified	79	2.47 (.89)		
Non-highly qualified	65	2.48 (1.02)	-.406	.686
7. Induction Program				
Highly qualified	59	2.27 (.93)		
Non-highly qualified	51	2.61 (1.02)	-1.813	.073
8. Total Helpfulness Score				
Highly qualified	39	18.87 (3.66)		
Non-highly qualified	30	20.77 (5.43)	-1.647	.106

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Job Satisfaction</i>				
1. Pride and respect from family and friends				
Highly qualified	79	3.47 (.57)		
Non-highly qualified	65	3.48 (.71)	-.080	.936
2. Relationship with colleagues				
Highly qualified	79	3.13 (.77)		
Non-highly qualified	65	3.17 (.74)	-.335	.738
3. Importance and challenge				
Highly qualified	78	3.06 (.59)		
Non-highly qualified	65	3.17 (.65)	-1.004	.317
4. Job security and permanence				
Highly qualified	79	3.04 (.74)		
Non-highly qualified	65	3.02 (.80)	.176	.861
5. Opportunity for developing new skills				
Highly qualified	77	2.82 (.70)		
Non-highly qualified	65	3.06 (.77)	-1.971	.051
6. Supervisors(s)				
Highly qualified	79	2.68 (.96)		
Non-highly qualified	65	3.11 (.85)	-2.786	.006*
7. Opportunity to use past training and skills				
Highly qualified	78	2.73 (.66)		
Non-highly qualified	65	2.85 (.67)	-1.038	.301
8. Working conditions				
Highly qualified	78	2.72 (.80)		
Non-highly qualified	65	2.75 (.85)	-.259	.796
9. Salary and fringe benefits				
Highly qualified	79	2.68 (.70)		
Non-highly qualified	65	2.63 (.80)	.419	.676

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
10. Total job satisfaction score				
Highly qualified	74	26.47 (.84)		
Non-highly qualified	65	27.23 (3.92)	-1.108	.270
<i>Job Stress</i>				
1. I carried school problems home with me				
Highly qualified	80	3.45 (1.39)		
Non-highly qualified	64	3.14 (1.34)	1.349	.179
2. I did not engage in exercise or another form of physical activity to deal with job-related stress.				
Highly qualified	80	3.43 (1.33)		
Non-highly qualified	65	3.17 (1.34)	1.148	.253
3. My work made me frustrated				
Highly qualified	80	3.16 (1.28)		
Non-highly qualified	64	2.89 (1.13)	1.336	.184
4. The amount of work I had to do interfered with how well it got done				
Highly qualified	80	2.74 (1.29)		
Non-highly qualified	65	2.60 (1.24)	.653	.515
5. I did not regularly discuss topics that upset me at work with family, friends, or co-workers.				
Highly qualified	79	2.27 (1.21)		
Non-highly qualified	64	2.78 (1.33)	-2.430	.016*
6. I did not look forward to going to work				
Highly qualified	80	2.46 (1.27)		
Non-highly qualified	65	2.28 (1.19)	.898	.371
7. My sense of humor did not help me to cope with stress at work.				
Highly qualified	80	2.06 (.93)		
Non-highly qualified	65	2.34 (.78)	-.633	.528

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
8. Work-related stress made me physically sick.				
Highly qualified	80	1.89 (1.11)		
Non-highly qualified	65	1.92 (1.24)	-.182	.856
9. Total job stress score				
Highly qualified	79	21.54 (4.92)		
Non-highly qualified	62	21.00 (4.61)	.671	.50
<i>Commitment to the Profession</i>				
1. Reported dedication and likelihood to stay in the profession.				
Highly qualified	78	4.71 (1.13)		
Non-highly qualified	65	4.60 (1.16)	.548	.584

Fifty one percent ( $n = 90$ ) of the beginning SETs reported that they had an additional teaching certification prior to their first day in the classroom. The following comment by a dual certified, middle school respondent highlights the perceived temptation of transferring to a general education position:

I still see myself in the field, but I am not sure that I will remain as a special education teacher. Personally, I find the job to be difficult and demanding.

Administrators often see special education as a dumping ground...

More often, however, participants saw their additional certification as an enhancement of their role in special education, not as a replacement. A high school respondent explained:

I am getting my degree in math education, but that doesn't mean that I am going to switch over to general education. This will help me become a highly qualified special education math teacher. I can't imagine ever leaving special education, it is my calling.

The qualitative data of this study did not support the belief that the majority of dual certified teachers exploit special education as a stepping stone on the path to a general education position.

There was very little difference in reported morale between subgroups. Figure 3 shows the mean morale scores in four key categories comparing those with multiple certifications and those only certified in special education. No statistically significant differences were found.

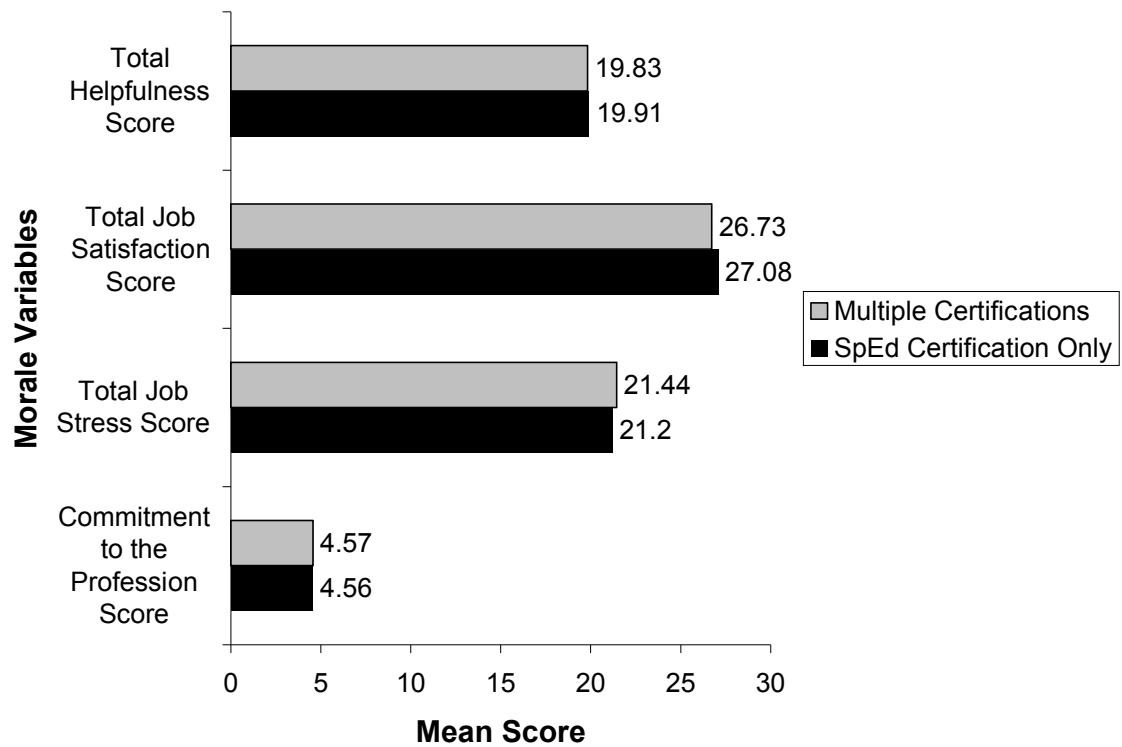


Figure 3. Select morale scores comparison between multiple certified and sped only respondents.

Furthermore, Table 10 provides the descriptive data for first year special education teachers with multiple certifications versus those only certified in special education. Corresponding *t*-tests were employed to determine whether differences were significant. Independent sample *t*-tests were completed using on the total subscale scores perceived helpfulness, job satisfaction, job stress, and commitment to the profession. Morale scores were highly similar between the two sub-groups. No statistically significant differences were found.



Table 10

*Comparison of Morale Variables between Multiple Certified and Single Certified First Year Special Education Teachers*

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Perceived Helpfulness</i>				
1. Other teachers				
Multiple certifications	88	3.18( .72)		
SpEd certified only	85	3.16 ( .92)	.136	.892
2. Department Head				
Multiple certifications	77	2.90 ( .95)		
SpEd certified only	82	3.02 (1.03)	-.813	.417
3. Mentor				
Multiple certifications	71	2.83 (1.00)		
SpEd certified only	76	3.03 (1.05)	-1.156	.250
4. Student Teaching				
Multiple certifications	71	2.80 ( .81)		
SpEd certified only	85	3.02 ( .99)	-1.247	.215
5. College Courses				
Multiple certifications	85	2.68 ( .80)		
SpEd certified only	78	2.72 ( .86)	-.272	.786
6. Administrators				
Multiple certifications	89	2.54 ( .93)		
SpEd certified only	87	2.46 ( .95)	.561	.575
7. Induction Program				
Multiple certifications	67	2.39 ( .95)		
SpEd certified only	66	2.44 ( .95)	-.312	.756
8. Total Helpfulness Score				
Multiple certifications	41	19.83 (3.56)		
SpEd certified only	43	19.91 (5.18)	-.080	.935

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Job Satisfaction</i>				
1. Pride and respect from family and friends				
Multiple certifications	89	3.40 (.65)		
SpEd certified only	87	3.52 (.65)	-1.153	.250
2. Relationship with colleagues				
Multiple certifications	89	3.09 (.78)		
SpEd certified only	87	3.22 (.72)	-1.135	.258
3. Importance and challenge				
Multiple certifications	88	3.11 (.67)		
SpEd certified only	87	3.16 (.57)	-.504	.615
4. Job security and permanence				
Multiple certifications	89	3.02 (.84)		
SpEd certified only	87	3.06 (.75)	-.291	.771
5. Opportunity for developing new skills				
Multiple certifications	87	2.97 (.65)		
SpEd certified only	86	2.97 (.79)	.004	.997
6. Supervisors(s)				
Multiple certifications	89	2.87 (.94)		
SpEd certified only	87	2.94 (.88)	-.562	.575
7. Opportunity to use past training and skills				
Multiple certifications	88	2.74 (.69)		
SpEd certified only	87	2.79 (.63)	-.546	.586
8. Working conditions				
Multiple certifications	88	2.73 (.84)		
SpEd certified only	86	2.73 (.79)	-.043	.966
9. Salary and fringe benefits				
Multiple certifications	89	2.67 (.71)		
SpEd certified only	87	2.72 (.74)	-.454	.651

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
10. Total job satisfaction score				
Multiple certifications	84	26.73 (4.26)		
SpEd certified only	85	27.08 (3.81)	-.554	.580
<i>Job Stress</i>				
1. I carried school problems home with me				
Multiple certifications	90	3.39 (1.35)		
SpEd certified only	86	3.21 (1.37)	.876	.382
2. I did not engage in exercise or another form of physical activity to deal with job-related stress.				
Multiple certifications	90	3.34 (1.27)		
SpEd certified only	87	3.23 (1.35)	.580	.562
3. My work made me frustrated				
Multiple certifications	90	3.09 (1.20)		
SpEd certified only	86	3.00 (1.17)	.499	.619
4. The amount of work I had to do interfered with how well it got done				
Multiple certifications	90	2.68 (1.33)		
SpEd certified only	86	2.74 (1.23)	-.343	.732
5. I did not regularly discuss topics that upset me at work with family, friends, or co-workers.				
Multiple certifications	89	2.55 (1.17)		
SpEd certified only	86	2.44 (1.33)	.576	.565
6. I did not look forward to going to work				
Multiple certifications	90	2.44 (1.20)		
SpEd certified only	87	2.33 (1.26)	.602	.548
7. My sense of humor did not help me to cope with stress at work.				
Multiple certifications	90	2.14 (1.01)		
SpEd certified only	87	2.07 (1.00)	.500	.618

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
8. Work-related stress made me physically sick.				
Multiple certifications	90	1.83 (1.10)		
SpEd certified only	86	1.90 (1.16)	-.364	.717
9. Total job stress score				
Multiple certifications	89	21.44 (4.90)		
SpEd certified only	90	21.20 (4.65)	.323	.747
<i>Commitment to the Profession</i>				
.				
1. Reported dedication and likelihood to stay in the profession.				
Multiple certifications	89	4.57 (1.18)		
SpEd certified only	86	4.56 (1.22)	.082	.935

*Grade Level, Teaching Environment, and Types of Disabilities Taught*

The respondents of this study confirmed the belief that special education is an extremely diverse occupation. They reported teaching a wide age range of students with numerous disabilities in a variety of environments.

Table 11 reflects the grade levels taught by the respondents. Almost half of respondents (48%) reported working with elementary school aged students. However, since 16% ( $n = 28$ ) of respondents reported teaching in more than one grade levels, the percentages sum to over 100.

Table 11

*Grade Levels Taught By Survey Respondents (N = 177)*

Grade Level	%	n
Early childhood/pre-school	7%	12
Elementary school (K-5)	47%	84
Middle school (6-8)	33%	59
High school (9-12)	27%	47

Beginning SETs also reported that they taught in many different environments.

Table 12 shows the breakdown of teaching environments reported by respondents.

Despite a persistent push towards full inclusion of students with disabilities, it is notable that 46% of respondents reported that they taught in a self-contained classroom.

Members of the sample reported that they were very mobile within their schools.

It is possible that this may contribute to their high levels of perceived stress, job dissatisfaction, or commitment to the profession. Almost three-fourths ( $n = 128$ ) of participants stated that they taught in at least two different teaching environments, therefore percentages add up to over 100.

Table 12

*Teaching Environments Reported by Survey Respondents (N = 177)*

Environment	%	<i>n</i>
Self-contained classroom	46%	82
Resource room	54%	95
Co-teaching/inclusion	42%	75
Consultant	8%	15
Monitor	5%	8
Other	5%	9

In every teaching environment, some SETs report stress, frustration and dissatisfaction. For example, one middle school interviewee shared his unique challenges in a self-contained classroom:

My first year, I had a self-contained class with 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders all mixed in together. They were all at different levels, learning different subjects. I was doing 40 different lesson plans a week. I spent all of my time correcting behaviors and no time actually teaching. It was like herding cats.

Special educators in co-teaching environments often have equal, but different challenges. A high school respondent divulged some of her problems with the inclusion model:

It is frustrating to me to be part of an inclusion team because here I am with more years experience than the person who is supposed to be the English teacher, and she is treating me as if I am the aide. No matter how it starts out, you are never treated as an equal.

Another said, “Because I am full inclusion, I do not usually have the opportunity to teach full lessons, unless I beg to be ‘allowed’ to teach.” Comments such as these reinforce the idea that it is essential for schools to provide support, supervision, and clear expectation to beginning SETs regardless of their teaching environment.

In addition to a wide variety of grade levels and settings, beginning SETs needed to become very familiar with a substantial number of disabilities. Participants were instructed to indicate all types of disabilities that their student had from a list of 14 choices (see Appendix A). The three most prevalent disabilities encountered were learning disabilities (92%), emotional disabilities (75%), and other health impaired, including attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (66%).

The sample reported needing to be familiar with a plethora of disabilities in their classroom. Only 5 respondents (3%) report teaching students with a single type of disability. However, 111 respondents (63%) reported interacting with at least five different disabilities during their first year. It is possible that a lack of formal preparation or experience in dealing with so many unique educational, emotional, and physical needs of students may contribute to reported feelings of stress, job dissatisfaction, or commitment to the profession. Figure 4 shows the total number of different disabilities encountered by first year SETs.

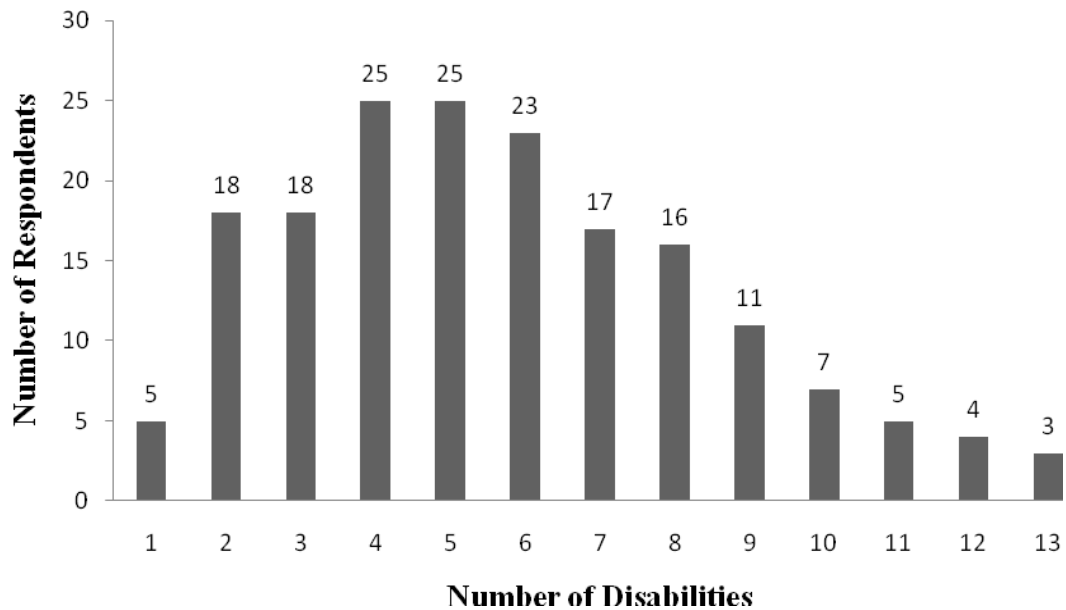


Figure 4. Number of different disabilities encountered by first year SETs.

### The Paperwork Burden

#### *Paperwork Beliefs Related to Presenting a Problem for First Year SETs*

Respondents were provided with a list of four choices and asked to select the statement that best described their current belief regarding the degree that they believed that paperwork presented a problem for first-year SETs.. The four choices were: “not a problem,” “a small problem,” “a moderate problem,” and “a severe problem.”

For the purposes of coding, analysis and comparison among sub-samples, the four choices were assigned an ascending numerical value between 1 and 4. Higher numbers were associated with a more severe perception of the problem.. A total of 175



respondents completed the item. Most respondents reported that paperwork was very challenging for those new to the field. The sample's mean score was 3.54 and the standard deviation was 1.20. Table 13 shows the percentage and number of respondents associated with each variable.

Table 13

*Degree That Paperwork Presents a Problem for First-Year SETs*

Belief	%	n
Not a problem	6%	10
A small problem	20%	35
A moderate problem	47%	84
A severe problem	27%	48
Total	100%	177

The initial question of the follow-up interview asked participants to give their opinion of the paperwork responsibility of special education teachers. Eleven participants prefaced their comments with a short initial reaction. These statements were collected as a parsimonious method of gauging a person's feelings on the topic. Most of these first impressions were extremely negative in tone. Comments included, "way too much," "overwhelming," "always changing," "pain in the ass," and "ridiculous."

Most felt that professional paperwork was very problematic. Seventy-four percent ( $n = 132$ ) reported that paperwork was either a moderate or severe problem for first year special educators. An interesting counter-example was provided by a beginning teacher who was both a mother of a special needs child and a paraprofessional for nine years. In reference to the paperwork, she stated in her interview that she “loved it” and it was “not a problem.” She felt that paperwork was “the only way to really get to know the kids.”

This individual reported completing the most number of IEPs among the entire sample, 155. She explained that her administrators drastically lightened her teaching load to allow her to focus on the bureaucratic tasks of the entire special education department.

*Paperwork Beliefs Related to Interfering with Instruction for First Year SETs*

Respondents were also provided with a list of four choices and asked to select the statement that best described their current belief regarding the degree that they believed that paperwork interfered with instructional duties for first-year SETs.. The four choices were: “does not interfere,” “interferes a small amount,” “interferes a moderate amount,” and “interferes a severe amount.”

For the purposes of coding, analysis and comparison among sub-samples, the four choices were assigned an ascending numerical value between 1 and 4. Higher numbers were associated with a more severe perception of the problem. A total of 177 respondents completed the item. Paperwork was seen as a major obstacle to quality instruction by most respondents. The sample’s mean score was 2.98 and the standard deviation was .83. Table 14 shows the percentage and number of respondents associated with each variable.

Table 14

*Degree That Paperwork Interferes With Instruction for First Year SETs*

Belief	%	<i>n</i>
Does not interfere	3%	7
Interferes a small amount	23%	41
Interferes a moderate amount	44%	77
Interferes a severe amount	29%	51
No answer	1%	1
Total	100%	177

Seventy three percent believed that paperwork interfered with instructional obligations to a moderate or severe degree. Similarly, many interviewees explained how frustrating it was to try to keep up on their teaching when they had so much paperwork to complete. Thirty-three percent ( $n = 6$ ) of interviewees gave examples of how their pedagogy had suffered due to bureaucratic commitments. For example, one interviewee stated:

During normal class time, I am expected to do meetings, write goals, and contact parents. It is a misuse of special education teachers. Last year I kept track of how much time I spent out of the classroom. Out of a 180 day school year, I was pulled out of the classroom for 72 days.

Another elaborated on the time crunch caused by needing to hold IEP meetings during the regular school day:

Our planning periods are only 50 minutes long and this is when we are expected to do our IEP meetings. So often, I'd have a parent in, and I'd feel as if I had to hurry because the bell was about to ring. They wanted to talk about their child and I felt bad because I was too focused on getting to class. It was difficult because you never knew if there would be someone to cover your class until you got there. My mind was totally scattered during those occasions.

Although 22% ( $n = 4$ ) of interviewees discussed how they were able to complete both teaching and paperwork by either working late, or taking work home, none were able to give examples or advice regarding how to successfully complete both activities within the confines of a normal teacher work day.

#### *Amount of Paperwork*

There was a large variation in the number of IEPs written by survey respondents during their first year. The number of IEPs ranged from a low of zero to a high of 155. ( $M = 18$ ,  $SD = 14$ ). The mode for the sample was 12. When the outlier result of 155 was removed from calculations, the group mean was 17 ( $SD = 11.94$ ). No statistically significant correlation was found between the number of IEPs written and either of the two aforementioned belief prompts (severity of paperwork problem or degree it interfered with instruction). The number of IEPs written by respondents during their first year is presented in Figure 5.

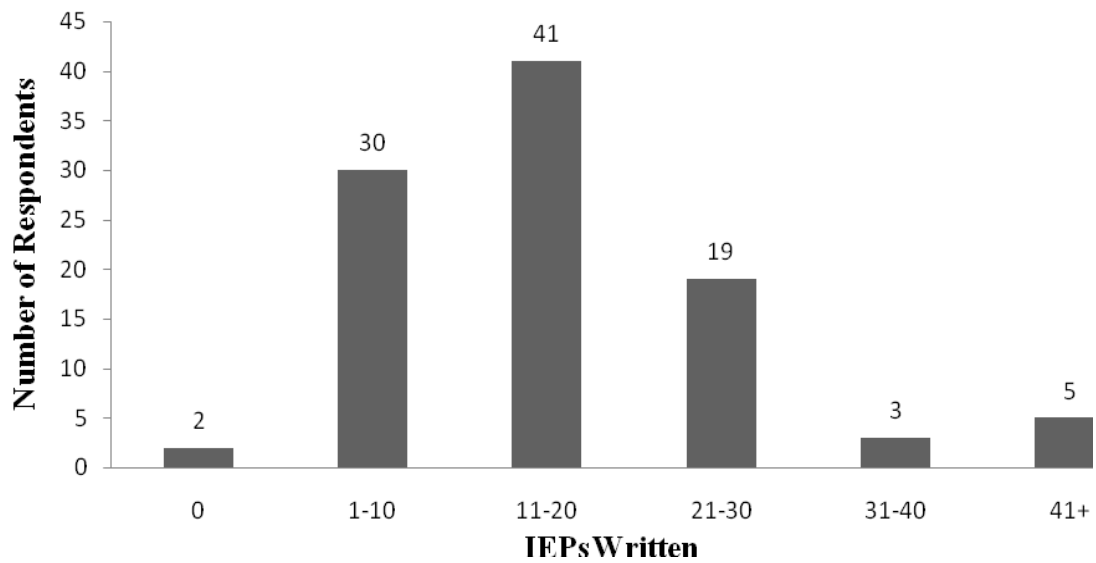
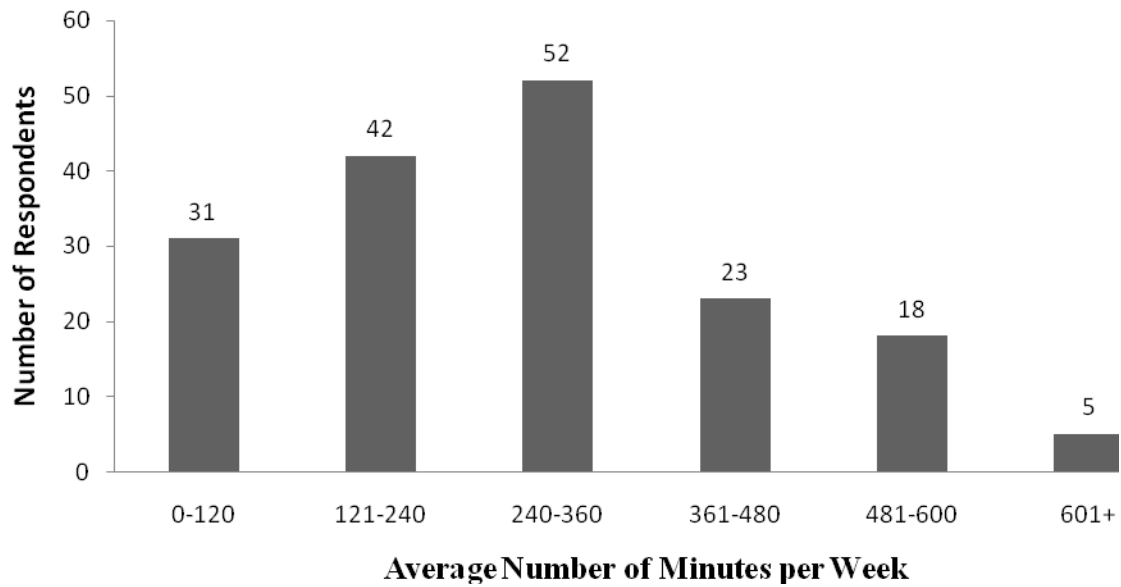


Figure 5. Number of IEPs written by respondents during their first year.

There was also a large variation in the amount of time reported spent working on paperwork. A previous SPeNSE study, (Carlson, Chen, Schroll, & Klein, 2003) found that the average special education teacher spent 300 minutes per week on paperwork responsibilities. The results of this sample were very similar ( $M = 297, SD = 166.35$ ). The shortest length of time reported was 30 minutes per week and the longest was 990. The mode for the sample was 300. The amount of time spent working on paperwork reported by respondents is shown in figure 6.



*Figure 6.* Estimated time on paperwork reported by respondents during first year.

A recurring theme among both participants and interviewees was that they felt that it was unrealistic or even impossible to spend the equivalent of an hour of every school day on paperwork. Instead, they usually spent their day strictly on planning, teaching and evaluating students. Paperwork was completed beyond regular school hours or at home. Over half of the interviewees ( $n = 10$ ), gave examples of making sacrifices in their social life because of after school paperwork duties.

Furthermore, it was not evident from the telephone interviews that teachers believed that paperwork duties became less of a burden or less time-consuming with experience. There were no examples of interviewees citing that paperwork became easier with time. Furthermore, when asked about paperwork advice for special education

majors, no interviewee suggested that the bureaucracy would become less of an issue with familiarity and training.

Survey participants also gave instances of paperwork interfering with their personal life. A second year teacher explained on her survey:

There is a lack of time to prepare during the school day. I cannot do everything I need to get done at once. For example, our school day ends at 2:30, but because of meetings, files and checking papers, today I got home at 6. This is not at all out of the ordinary for me.

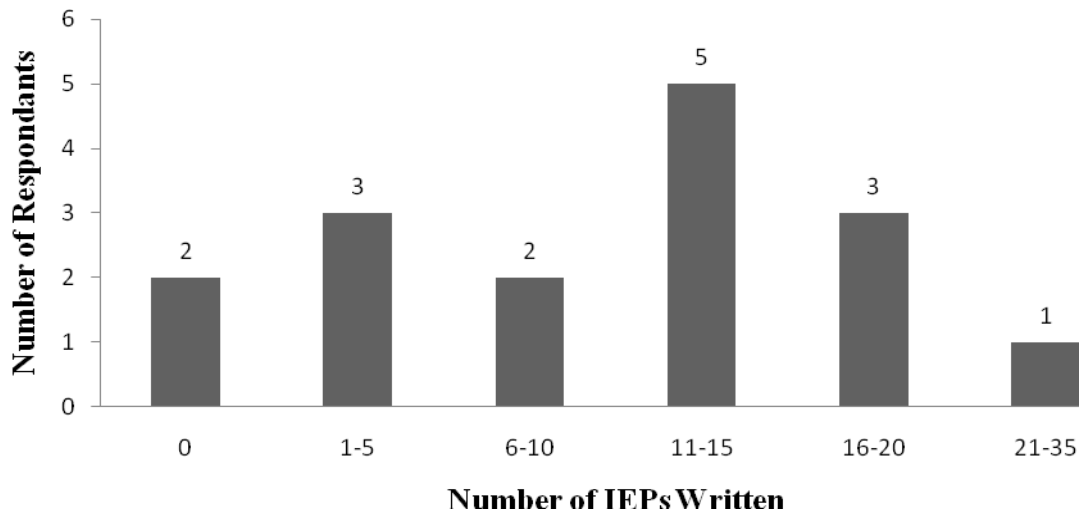
Another respondent shared how she regularly sacrificed her lunch break in order to complete her paperwork, “Another thing I do, that many people think is unhealthy, is that I eat in the classroom. Sometimes I spill food on my papers, but at least I get it done.” Based on comments like these, most beginning SETs recognized and accepted the fact that the demands of their jobs extended beyond the normal school day.

Study results suggested a possible relationship between the amount of time a teacher spent writing IEPs and her paperwork beliefs. Pearson’s correlation coefficient test revealed a modest positive score ( $r = 0.20, p < .01$ ) between IEP writing time and a teacher’s beliefs regarding the severity of the paperwork problem. A similar positive correlation ( $r = 0.21, p < .01$ ) was found between IEP writing time and the degree to which a teacher believed that paperwork interfered with instruction.

### *Effects of a Reduced Caseload*

Only 9% of respondents ( $n = 16$ ) were intentionally assigned a reduced caseload (less paperwork) during their first year of teaching. Eighty percent ( $n = 141$ ) were not assigned less paperwork, and 11% ( $n = 20$ ) were unsure. These data suggest that this strategy is not very common among America's school districts, especially when compared to other support systems for first year SETs such as mentors and induction programs.

First year teachers with a reduced caseload reported writing a mean of 12 IEPs ( $SD = 8.8$ ). Only two respondents did not write any IEPs, yet 25% of them ( $n = 4$ ) wrote 16 or more. These results are shown in figure 7.



*Figure 7.* Number of IEPs written by respondents with a reduced caseload.



An analysis of time spent working on paperwork was completed for this subsample. Members spent an average of 209 minutes ( $SD = 139.42$ ) on paperwork per week. Surprisingly, every respondent reported working on paperwork a minimum of 30 minutes per week. This includes the two respondents stated that they were not responsible for any IEPs. These results are shown in figure 8.

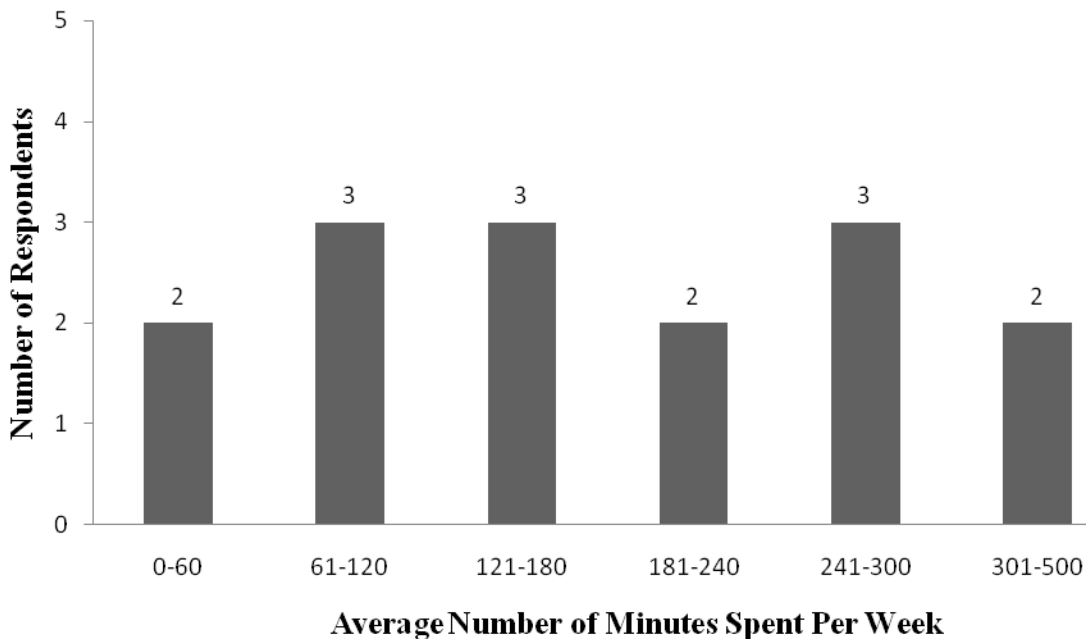


Figure 8. Estimated time spent on paperwork by respondents with a reduced caseload.

The paperwork beliefs descriptive data for first year special education teachers assigned a reduced caseload versus those who reported a full caseload is reported in

Table 15. No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups in reference to paperwork beliefs.

Due to the large discrepancy between sizes of the sub-samples, a normal distribution of scores cannot be assured. Therefore, Mann-Whitney U tests were completed for a comparison of “the degree that paperwork presents a problem for first-year SETs” and “degree that paperwork interferes with instruction for first-year SETs.” No statistically significant differences were found between sub-groups.

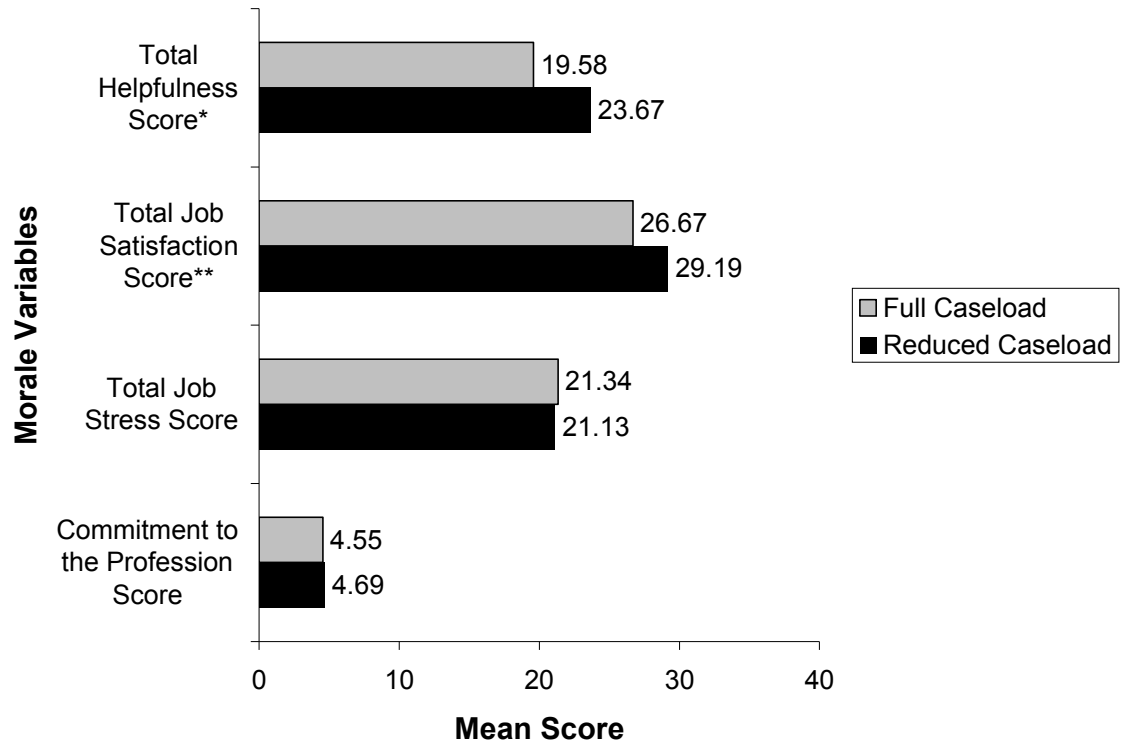
Table 15

*Comparison of Paperwork Beliefs between First Year SETs Assigned a Full Caseload and Those Assigned a Reduced Caseload*

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Paperwork presents a problem for first-year SETs				
Full caseload	161	2.95 (.83)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.06 (.85)	1181.50	.557
2. Paperwork interferes with instruction for first-year SETs				
Full caseload	160	2.97 (.83)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.06 (.85)	1185.00	.602

However, there were some noticeable difference between the subgroups in the areas of perceived helpfulness and job satisfaction. Figure 9 shows the mean morale

scores in four key categories comparing those with a full caseload and those with reduced caseload.



\*Mann-Whitney  $U$  tests revealed a statistically significant difference in mean score ( $U = 97.0, p = .017$ ) in “Total Helpfulness” score.

\*\* Mann-Whitney  $U$  tests revealed a statistically significant difference in mean scores ( $U = 809.00, p = .025$ ) in “Total Job Satisfaction” score.

*Figure 9.* Select morale scores comparison between respondents with a full and reduced caseload.

Table 16 provides the morale descriptive data for first year special education teachers assigned a reduced caseload versus those who reported a full caseload. Due to the large discrepancy between sizes of the sub-samples, a normal distribution of scores

cannot be assured. Therefore, Mann-Whitney U tests were completed for a comparison of reduced caseload versus full caseload on the total subscale scores perceived helpfulness, job satisfaction, job stress, and commitment to the profession. Statistically significant differences were found in seven of the 28 comparisons.

Table 16

*Comparison of Morale Variables between First Year SETs Assigned a Full Caseload and Those Assigned a Reduced Caseload*

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Perceived Helpfulness</i>				
1. Other teachers				
Full caseload	158	3.17 (.84)		
Reduced caseload	15	3.20 (.68)	1163.00	.898
2. Department Head				
Full caseload	143	2.93 (1.00)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.25 (.86)	947.50	.237
3. Mentor				
Full caseload	135	2.90 (1.04)		
Reduced caseload	12	3.25 (.75)	681.50	.340
4. Student Teaching				
Full caseload	124	2.89 (1.01)		
Reduced caseload	12	3.08 (.79)	686.50	.643
5. College Courses				
Full caseload	149	2.69 (.83)		
Reduced caseload	14	2.79 (.89)	983.50	.705
6. Administrators				
Full caseload	160	2.46 (.92)		
Reduced caseload	16	2.94 (1.06)	922.50	.054*
7. Induction Program				
Full caseload	122	2.39 (.95)		
Reduced caseload	11	2.73 (.90)	530.50	.229

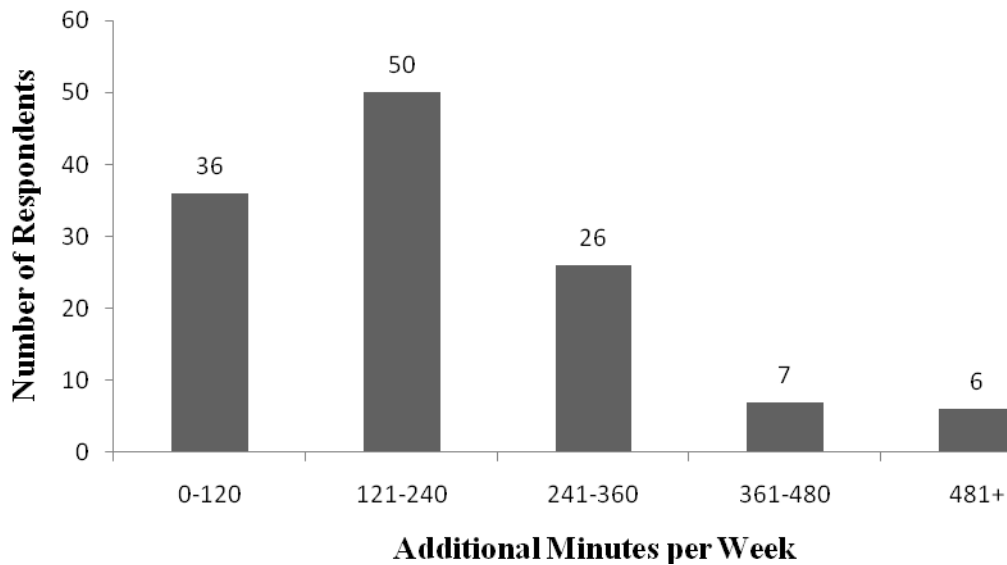
Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
8. Total Helpfulness Score				
Full caseload	78	19.58 (4.44)		
Reduced caseload	6	23.67 (2.25)	97.00	.017*
<i>Job Satisfaction</i>				
1. Pride and respect from family and friends				
Full caseload	160	3.45 ( .65)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.86 ( .63)	1159.00	.481
2. Relationship with colleagues				
Full caseload	160	3.13 ( .75)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.38 ( .72)	1043.00	.177
3. Importance and challenge				
Full caseload	159	3.13 ( .62)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.25 ( .58)	1151.00	.468
4. Job security and permanence				
Full caseload	160	3.04 ( .79)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.00 ( .89)	1231.00	.785
5. Opportunity for developing new skills				
Full caseload	157	2.92 ( .73)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.38 ( .50)	845.00	.015*
6. Supervisors(s)				
Full caseload	160	3.04 ( .79)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.50 ( .63)	760.00	.005*
7. Opportunity to use past training and skills				
Full caseload	159	2.73 ( .65)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.13 ( .61)	893.00	.025*
8. Working conditions				
Full caseload	158	2.68 ( .80)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.25 ( .78)	751.50	.004*

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
9. Salary and fringe benefits				
Full caseload	160	2.69 (.73)		
Reduced caseload	16	2.75 (.76)	1246.50	.840
10. Total job satisfaction score				
Full caseload	153	26.67 (4.01)		
Reduced caseload	16	29.19 (3.58)	809.00	.025*
<i>Job Stress</i>				
1. I carried school problems home with me				
Full caseload	160	3.33 (1.35)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.00 (1.41)	1107.50	.363
2. I did not engage in exercise or another form of physical activity to deal with job-related stress.				
Full caseload	161	3.29 (1.34)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.31 (.95)	1247.00	.829
3. My work made me frustrated				
Full caseload	160	3.05 (1.19)		
Reduced caseload	16	3.00 (1.10)	1278.00	.992
4. The amount of work I had to do interfered with how well it got done				
Full caseload	160	2.69 (1.28)		
Reduced caseload	16	2.88 (1.26)	1166.50	.548
5. I did not regularly discuss topics that upset me at work with family, friends, or co-workers.				
Full caseload	160	2.49 (1.26)		
Reduced caseload	15	2.53 (1.13)	1156.50	.811
6. I did not look forward to going to work				
Full caseload	160	2.40 (1.24)		
Reduced caseload	16	2.31 (1.14)	1256.50	.868

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
7. My sense of humor did not help me to cope with stress at work.				
Full caseload	160	2.08 ( .98)		
Reduced caseload	16	2.38 (1.20)	1124.50	.381
8. Work-related stress made me physically sick.				
Full caseload	160	1.86 (1.13)		
Reduced caseload	16	1.94 (1.18)	1215.00	.716
9. Total job stress score				
Full caseload	154	21.34 (4.90)		
Reduced caseload	15	21.13 (3.20)	1123.50	.861
<i>Commitment to the Profession</i>				
1. Reported dedication and likelihood to stay in the profession.				
Full caseload	159	4.55 (1.21)		
Reduced caseload	16	4.69 (1.14)	1207.50	.724

Respondents were asked to estimate how much time that they could spend on instructional duties if they were assigned a reduced caseload during their first year. Teachers estimated that they would be able to spend more than an additional three hours per week, ( $M = 197.09$ ,  $SD = 132.58$ ) on tasks such as planning and assessing with this modification. These results are given in figure 10.





*Figure 10.* Estimated additional instructional time provided by a reduced caseload.

No qualitative evidence was found in either the open-ended survey questions, or the follow-up interviews to support the claim that a reduced caseload was particularly beneficial to first year SETs. It is inconclusive whether this reflects upon the quality of the strategy, or if the associated sub-sample was too small to provide sufficient data.

### Morale

#### *Perceived Helpfulness Likert Scaled Survey Prompts*

Based on the data presented in table 1, results revealed that first year teachers may find more value in informal sources of paperwork help and support such as their peers and immediate supervisors. Activities that were traditionally considered more formal and structured such as college courses and induction programs were not viewed as equally helpful.

Seasoned respondents did not acknowledge receiving as much paperwork support as those brand new to teaching. A negative correlation coefficient ( $r = -0.36, p < .01$ ) was found between the number of years teaching experience and perceived helpfulness during the first year.

#### *Perceived Helpfulness Open Ended Responses*

An open ended response prompted participants to report any one factor that most enabled them to handle their paperwork duties during their first year. Responses were recorded, analyzed and coded according to emergent themes.

As was the case with all open-ended survey responses in this study, the results were independently coded by another individual who was familiar with both special education practices and social science research methods. Themes were then compared and discussed. Inter-rater reliability for all open ended prompts was set at a minimum of 95%.

In areas of disagreement, researchers met and discussed the proposed themes associated with particular responses. Results were revised and rewritten until meeting the minimum acceptability criteria established above.

Once again, novice SETs reported that their fellow teachers was the best source of support and advice regarding their paperwork duties. Many respondents and interviewees made specific comments about the positive traits of their co-workers that they found most helpful, such as “experienced,” “patient,” and “encouraging.” Specific findings are presented in Table 17.

Table 17

*Greatest Source of Paperwork Helpfulness Reported by First Year SETs*

Source	%	<i>n</i>
Help from co-workers/mentor	41%	63
My work ethic/personality	16%	25
Past experience/education	15%	23
Working beyond school day	13%	20
Administrator/department head	10%	15
Other (e.g., aides, parents, afraid of termination)	5%	8
Total	100%	154

*Sacrificing Personal Time*

The results of this open-ended question reinforced the notion that a substantial amount of paperwork completion occurs beyond traditional contract hours. Thirteen percent ( $n = 20$ ) of the open response sample believed that “working beyond the school day” was the *most* helpful factor in completing their paperwork responsibilities. Many others stated that they have stayed after school or taken files home on a regular basis in order to get caught up.

Some of the survey comments revealed personal sacrifices that first year teachers endured in order to complete their paperwork duties. Young teachers commented that

they were grateful that they had no major personal responsibilities to detract them from their new jobs. One teacher stated that she was grateful for “being single, not married or having children” so that nobody would compete for her time. Another respondent stated, “I didn’t have any children so I was able to work long afternoons and evenings at home. If I had had children, it would have been harder to devote as much time to all the paperwork.”

On the other end of the spectrum, a career switching respondent believed that it worked to her advantage to go into special education after her kids were already raised:

Luckily, my children are older. I can spend more time at work after school doing what I need to do. I usually spend ninety minutes a day after school, four days a week going over my paperwork, my lessons, and contacting other teachers.

Another explained how she attempted to juggle her marriage and her job, “Due to the fact that my husband worked out of town...I was able to stay until 5 or so daily. I would not have been able to complete paperwork during normal hours.”

However, not every person was able to successfully give equal attention to both home life and work life. Sometimes the two overlapped. A third year teacher explained on her survey how her paperwork duties began to spill over into her family time:

One curse/blessing this year is that we were assigned laptops so that we could access the IEP program from home. I find myself resorting to taking my paperwork home. It helps me at school; it doesn’t help my family or marriage.

Beginning special educators in the sample were very aware of the demands on their personal time presented by paperwork. It was much less evident that individuals had

proven methods to deal with these demands. None of the eighteen interviews participants mentioned a specific time management strategy used to provide balance in their lives.

#### *Job Satisfaction Likert Scaled Survey Prompts*

In reference to table 2, although “Pride and respect from family and friends” earned the highest satisfaction score ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = .65$ ), all nine variables were ranked above average (2.0). Correlation coefficients revealed a slight negative relationship ( $r = -0.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between job satisfaction and years experience as well as a moderate negative relationship between job satisfaction and job stress ( $r = -0.60$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

However, no relationship was found between job satisfaction and either the number of IEPs written ( $r = -0.10$ ,  $p = .898$ ) or time spent on paperwork ( $r = 0.70$ ,  $p = .365$ )

#### *Job Satisfaction Open Ended Responses*

One of the follow-up interview questions asked participants whether or not they would become a SET if they had a chance to do it all over again. The purpose of this question was to not only determine whether or not beginning SETs were satisfied with their first job, but also how satisfied they were with their profession as a whole. Seven interviewees gave unequivocal statements regarding their choices.

Six of the seven stated that they would “definitely do it all over again.” These teachers were very adamant that special education was the best career for them. One individual best represented the sentiments of the group, “I absolutely love what I do, and would do it all over again in a heartbeat.”

The one dissenting opinion was from a fourth year, high school SET. He was planning to transfer from his school's special education department to the business department. His comments clarify his reason for his degree of job dissatisfaction:

Knowing what I know now, I probably would not go into special education.

Especially since general ed. teachers have no respect for us. They think we don't teach, so we don't do anything at all. They have no idea about all of the paperwork that we do.

Respondents were also asked to complete an open response prompt regarding any one factor that provided the most job satisfaction during their first year. Responses were recorded, analyzed and coded according to emergent themes. Table 18 displays the results of this prompt.

Table 18

*Greatest Source of Job Satisfaction Reported by First Year SETs*

Source	%	<i>n</i>
My students	48%	69
Relationships with co-teachers	25%	36
Feeling good about what I do	11%	16
Improving as a teacher	8%	11
Working conditions	8%	11
Total	100%	143

Similar to the Likert scaled responses, beginning special educators found the most job satisfaction from intangible rewards. Almost half of all respondents (48%) cited their students as their source of greatest satisfaction. These comments expressed the rewarding feelings that teachers felt after witnessing the growth and progress of their students. For example, a respondent wrote:

The students provided most, if not all of my job satisfaction. What I call their “aha” moment, when they finally understand a concept... Their appreciation for my patience and help that I give them, things like that are very rewarding.

Several other respondents and interviewees commented specifically about this “aha” moment. Others explained it as, “the light bulb going on,” or witnessing the moment they “got it.” Some cited a specific benchmark of success for their students such as “watching them walk across that stage with their diploma” and “celebrating their success on the standardized tests.”

The second most common source of job satisfaction was relationships with co-workers. This point reinforces the earlier claim that beginning SETs see great value in the helpfulness provided by other teachers. Some respondents explained how their peers went out of their way to provide guidance and support. One teacher explained how she valued the input of colleagues, “(they) helped me understand the environment in which I was working and provide useful strategies for helping the students become successful.”

A few respondents mentioned developing relationships with co-workers that went beyond professional courtesy. These individuals commented upon the lasting bond and camaraderie that developed with other teachers. One stated, “I have made lasting friendships, and we really have learned to depend one on another at times.”

#### *Job Stress Likert Scaled Survey Prompts*

Based on the results of the table 3, a special educator’s first year in the classroom is very stressful. Three of the eight statements were reported as occurring “fairly often” on average, by the sample. Furthermore, the perception of first year job stress did not change over time. No statistically significant correlation was found between job stress and years experience ( $r = 0.49$ ,  $p = .529$ ) Furthermore, no relationship was found



between job stress and either the number of IEPs written ( $r = -0.35, p = .651$ ), or time spent on paperwork ( $r = .103, p = .192$ ).

The data did show that the beginning SETs were effectively utilizing coping mechanisms to deal with job stress. Strategies such as “a good sense of humor” and “talking about problems with others” were used on a regular basis by most participants.

The least reported stressor on the survey was “work-related stress made me physically sick” ( $M = 1.86, SD = 1.24$ ). Although few respondents mentioned work-related illnesses in their responses and interviews, it presented a very serious problem for the small number of teachers whom did.

One respondent reported on the numerous health related problems during her first year, many of which were related to the stress of her job:

I became very ill during my first year of teaching. I had bronchitis twice, and digestive issues due to the stress, along with the occasional migraine I ended up going to a homeopath, a chiropractor, and this year, the occasional visit to the massage therapist.

Another teacher said that he was best able to deal with his job stress with “medication.” This response proved to be somewhat ambiguous. It was impossible to interpret “medicine” as either over the counter drugs, doctor prescribed drugs, or some sort of euphemism for illegal substances.

Physical and psychosomatic illnesses were not the only health related issues that plagued sample members. A few also reported mental health struggles. One woman

explained on the survey, “I started seeing a psychologist to help me figure out better ways to handle the amount of stress that I was experiencing.”

Others documented needing to get help because of significant interpersonal relationship problems with co-workers, “(I went to) counseling. My first year was incredibly disappointing as far as the level of support that I received to do my job and the stress level.”

Similarly, a respondent shared how her interactions with an administrator, whom she did not respect, had a detrimental effect on her mental health:

I went to counseling because my supervisor, who had no special education background and no administrative credentials, made my life a living Hell. She would insist that we not follow laws because the school wanted to use the money for sports and activities and that these special education students did not have a chance to go to college. I had the union involved all three years I was under her. She was the only thing that made the job horrible.

#### *Job Stress Open Ended Responses*

To gain a better understanding of how first year SETs dealt with professional stress, respondents were asked to cite the one factor that best helped them to deal with job stress during their first year in the classroom. For many of these individuals, it was critical that they received support from important people in their lives. Over two-thirds of respondents (67%) stated that support from family members, friends, or co-workers best helped them cope with job-related stress. The specific findings are provided in Table 19.

Table 19

*Factor that Best Helped First Year SETs Cope with Job Stress*

Factor	%	<i>n</i>
Support from family and friends	34%	49
Support from co-workers	33%	47
Positive attitude/sense of humor	13%	19
Exercise	6%	9
Other	3%	4
Hobbies	3%	4
Religion	3%	4
Interaction with my students	3%	4
Help from a Mental Health Professional	2%	3
Total	100%	143

Particular comments within the “other” category included “a long commute to work.” “frequent vacation days,” and “my alternate certification program.” A substantial number of respondents cited more than one factor. However, since the prompt asked for the *best* factor, it was decided that some respondents may have felt limited to only name one variable. Therefore, if a response contained two or more factors, only the first one mentioned was included in the analysis.

Six individuals mentioned the support of family and friends who were also professional educators. Whereas, these people were not co-workers per se, they may have been able to provide additional empathy and insight compared to the population at large.

The third most prevalent response was a “positive attitude/sense of humor.” Many teachers explained that the best way to deal with stress was remain optimistic or to appreciate the lighter side of their jobs. One respondent shared how she was sometimes able to step back and recognize the absurdity of her situation:

I really do think that it was my attitude of “it is what it is.” I am fairly easy going (definitely not a Type-A) and handled what came my way one step at a time.

Laughing a lot helped also. Sometimes when things seemed just too ridiculous to be true (but you knew they were) laughing was the only solution!!!

Teachers who consider themselves flexible and easy going may report a lower level of stress, but how do these traits affect the organizational demands of special education paperwork? When asked to provide paperwork advice to a special education college major, many interviewees recommended that the student become “extremely organized,” “very prepared,” and “detail oriented.”

Are these two work ethics mutually exclusive? Is it desirable, or even possible, for a successful SET to be both an “easy going” and “detailed oriented” as the situation warrants? A third year teacher made an observation during her interview regarding how both characteristics were very important to her:

I model consistency with my students and (I) behave in a manner that I expect them to behave as well...Although organization is very important, I think it is also

important to be flexible. Whenever I am writing a lesson plan or teaching new material I try to stay very flexible and go with the flow.

An unexpected finding was that many respondents mentioned God, religion, or prayer as the best way to help them cope with job related stress during their first year. There was no mention of these variables in the literature review on job stress and coping mechanisms of beginning special education teachers. Furthermore, since the sample consisted entirely of public school teachers, it was not expected that many would necessarily report on the importance of their religious life.

One teacher reported on the survey that the most important factor for her was “prayer, because I walk by faith, not by sight.” Another shared, “I relied on God to get me through the hard times and He never let me down.” Several others mentioned “prayer,” “going to church,” and “reading the Bible.”

It should be noted that the 3% documented in table 19 somewhat underestimates the importance of religion for members of the sample. As discussed earlier, many individuals mentioned more than a single response. If every response that referenced religion were included, the final results would be closer to 7%.

#### *Commitment to the Profession Likert Scaled Survey Prompt*

The results of table 4 suggest that the sample is very committed to the field of special education. Ninety percent of respondents reported no immediate plans for leaving special education. In addition, almost a third (28%) aspired to eventually assume some sort of leadership role. No statistically significant correlation was found between years experience and commitment to the profession ( $r = 0.01, p = .992$ ). Furthermore, no

correlation was found between intent to leave the field and either the number of IEPs written ( $r = -.107, p = .161$ ), or time spent on paperwork ( $r = .030, p = .698$ ). Despite the documented stress, frustration, and problems associated with their jobs, these beginning SETs report that they are very dedicated to the profession.

#### *Commitment to the Profession Open Ended Responses*

Follow up interviews reinforced this level of commitment. Individuals were asked to predict where they see themselves professionally in five years. Fourteen out of the eighteen interviewees believed that they would still be in special education in some capacity. Some were content to be in the classroom while others felt that they had more to offer in an administrative or advisory role.

Interviewees who planned to stay in the field said things like “it is my calling,” “I love what I am doing,” and “I have a lot to offer.” A dominant theme for many of them was that they perceived special education as a unique lifelong vocation.

The four SETs who did not plan to remain shared no common motive for their change. One planned to retire, another wanted to raise a family, the third aspired to go back to school fulltime, and the last wanted to switch over to general education. No specific evidence was found to support a feeling disillusionment or disappointment. Likewise, there was no mention of regret in becoming a special educator.

## 5. Analysis

### Analysis of the Research Questions

#### *Research Question Number One*

The first research question of the study was, “Does the amount of paperwork affect the level of job satisfaction for first-year special education teachers?” Previous studies, such as Stempein and Loeb (2002), concluded that special educators, especially those who were young or inexperienced, were vulnerable to job dissatisfaction.

These findings were not replicated in the current study.

In the current study, no correlation was found between job satisfaction and either the number of IEPs written ( $r = 0.10, p = .898$ ), or the amount of time spent on paperwork ( $r = 0.70, p = .365$ ). Furthermore, mean job satisfaction scores were rated as “above average” ( $> 2.0$ ) for all survey variables. Interview transcripts revealed some severe challenges faced by a small percentage of the group, but these challenges were not widespread enough to make generalization for the entire sample.

Data suggested that paperwork alone, may not be enough to increase job dissatisfaction. However, it may serve as a contributing factor. This underscores previous research by Dangal, Bunch, and Coopman (1987), whom found excessive paperwork to be “the straw that broke the camel’s back” in SETs’ decision to leave the field.

Participants cited professional relationships, both with co-workers and students, as their greatest sources of job satisfaction. This supports the previous findings of Whitaker (2003), whom found that beginning SETs whom developed a professional relationship with their mentor to have higher levels of job satisfaction.

These findings suggest that school districts should consider paying closer attention to how beginning SETs interact with, and receive support from, their colleagues. Currently, many schools spend large amounts of time and money on formal induction programs for their newest teachers. The data suggests that fostering opportunities for special educators to work together and get to know each other may produce similar, if not better, results. Likewise, schools may encourage new teachers to bond with their students. It might be beneficial for districts to give teachers opportunities to know the entire child. This may lead to not only improved levels of job satisfaction, but also more relevant and sophisticated IEPs, goals, and partnerships with families.

#### *Research Question Number Two*

The second research question of the study was, “Does the amount of paperwork affect the level of job stress for first-year special education teachers?” Several previous studies have cited paperwork and other professional duties as a major source of stress and burnout for SETs (Olson & Matuskey, 1982; Platt & Olson, 1990; Emhich, 2001). The current study provided mixed results.

No statistically significant correlation was revealed between amount of job stress and either the number of IEPs written ( $r = .035, p = .651$ ) or the amount of time spent on paperwork ( $r = .103, p = .192$ ). Similar to job satisfaction findings, the paperwork



burden of most special educators may not be overly stressful on its own, but it may well be a contributing factor in an increased level of job stress.

Despite no evidence of an actual relationship between paperwork and job stress, there were many indicators that beginning SETs perceived paperwork to be a substantial problem. Similar to studies by Piotrowski and Plash (2006) and Billingsley et al. (2004), paperwork was perceived to be a severe problem by the sample. Two survey questions revealed that close to seventy-five percent of respondents believed that paperwork was a significant problem for first year special educators. The interviews also revealed numerous opinions, anecdotes, and experiences that confirmed that new SETs deemed paperwork as overwhelming, frustrating, and confusing.

There seems to be a discrepancy between the *perceived* level of paperwork-related job stress for beginning SETs and the actual *experienced* level. One possible explanation for this difference may be due to teachers' numerous reported coping strategies. In other words, even though teachers experienced a great deal of stress, they also practice healthy techniques to cope with it.

Previous studies did not measure if or how SETs coped with job stress. In the current study, SETs reported regularly engaging in proven stress-reducing activities such as exercise, humor, and religion. Participation in activities like these may help rejuvenate educators and prevent anxiety, burnout, or some health problems.

Colleges of education, and other organizations dedicated to preparing new SETs are encouraged to take steps to inform candidates of the stressors associated with the job. School districts might benefit from creating programs such as exercise programs, book

clubs and similar activities among their employees. These experiences could not only provide a positive outlet for job-related stress, but also may promote camaraderie and rapport among colleagues.

Respondents cited “support from family and friends” as the most helpful factor in dealing with job stress. Study results suggested that the paperwork burden may interfere with this outlet for many individuals. A substantial number of teachers explained that paperwork was completed at home or beyond work hours. Several shared unsuccessful attempts to balance the demands of their home lives with their work lives.

Study data suggests that beginning special educators need to aggressively set aside time for their relationships with family and friends. It is suggested that they be more willing and able to prioritize a significant portion of their time to their loved ones without the hassles, stress, and complications brought about by paperwork. To paraphrase a cliché, “no one wished on their deathbed that they spent more time writing IEPs.”

### *Research Question Number Three*

The third research question of the study was, “Does the amount of paperwork affect first-year special education teacher’s commitment to the profession?”

Previous research such as Brownell, Smith, McNellis, and Miller (1997) and George, George, Gersten, and Grosenick (1995) suggested a relationship between excessive paperwork and the attrition rate of SETs. The results of this study do not reinforce those findings. No correlation was found between intent to leave the field and either the number of IEPs written ( $r = -.107, p = .161$ ), or time spent on paperwork ( $r = .030, p = .698$ ).

According to the results of the survey and the follow-up interviews, beginning SETs saw their future in field very optimistically. Only ten percent of the sample had any immediate plans of leaving special education. This is a much smaller percentage than any comparable study.

Conversely, almost a third of the sample (28%) felt that they had enough enthusiasm, interest, and dedication to special education to eventually assume a leadership role such as a department head or a teacher supervisor. Previous studies did not include a leadership option among their attrition prompts, therefore their respondents may not have had an opportunity to convey an accurate degree of dedication to the field.

Similar patterns and themes were uncovered in the follow-up interviews. Most individuals had no immediate plans to leave special education. The minority who did usually cited pedestrian reasons such as moving, retirement, or marriage rather than factors specifically related to the field. This study also did not replicate previous research that asserted that substantial numbers of SETs were transferring to general education. A recurring theme in the current study was that these teachers were here by choice, and they were here to stay.

In order to harness this level of dedication and enthusiasm, stakeholders should consider creating opportunities for these individuals to thrive and advance in the special education profession. It is recommended that school districts promote professional development activities for their SETs. Examples include encouraging teachers to pursue National Board Certification, job shadowing programs for future administrators, and tuition reimbursement for advanced degrees.

Colleges and universities should also consider taking steps to support these teachers as they attempt to advance in their careers. Departments of special education might apply for grants to help pay for the tuition, books, and fees of doctoral students whom aspire to become teacher educators. Findings suggest that it is especially important for these departments to be sensitive to the time and familial demands associated with doctoral students whom have a full time job.

*Research Question Number Four*

The fourth research question of the study was, “Which, if any, demographics positively affect the first year special education teacher’s ability to handle the demands of paperwork?” No previous research was found that directly addressed this question. In the current study, no specific demographic such as being a career switcher, being “highly qualified,” or having multiple certifications was linked to a consistent and substantial difference in morale scores. Likewise, no pattern of responses was regularly associated with any particular demographic in the follow-up interviews.

The results of this question suggest that the needs of beginning SETs are very complex and attempts to use any particular demographic to predict a novice teacher’s success may be of limited value. In this study, intrinsic characteristic such as positive professional relationships, a strong work ethic, and a sense of pride and accomplishment were more often associated with well-adjusted special educators.

Respondents were also asked to cite which variables were the most helpful during their first year in completing their paperwork duties. Similar to the results of the other research questions, the guidance and support of their peers was found to be extremely

valuable to first year SETs. It should be noted that co-workers were perceived as being more helpful than some of the more formal activities designed to support those new to education such as student-teaching assignments and induction programs.

In order to take advantage of the nurturing benefits provided by other teachers, school leaders may want to take steps to ensure that veteran teachers have the resources and motivation necessary to help those newest to the field. Seasoned SETs should first be aware of how valuable their experience and knowledge are perceived by first year teachers. Districts are encouraged to also offer incentives such as recertification points or professional leave time for experienced teachers whom work closely with those new to the classroom.

#### *Research Question Number Five*

The fifth research question of the study was, “Does the recollection of how paperwork demands affected first year morale differ between beginning special education teachers and those in the early-stage of their careers?” Previous research suggested that first year SETs had a number of specific problems and concerns.

Mastropieri (2001) cited behavior management, unfamiliarity with the curriculum, and an abundance of non-instructional responsibilities as some of the most prevalent issues confronting beginning SETs. Butcher-Carter and Scruggs (2001) mention the pervasive sense of isolation as a major hurdle for this group. Likewise, Whitaker (2001) described the importance of a mentor as a proven support system for those new to the classroom. It is clear that first year teachers have many pressing issues to deal with.

However, it is unclear whether veteran SETs reflect upon their first year problems with the same level of severity or if “time heals all wounds.”

One of the predicted hypotheses of this study was that experienced teachers would report higher levels of first year morale compared to current beginners. It was thought that with sufficient reflection and experience, seasoned teachers would surmise that “things weren’t as bad as I thought.” Surprisingly, the opposite results were found.

There was a negative correlation coefficient ( $r = -0.36, p < .01$ ) between years experience and perceived amount of first year help. A similar negative correlation ( $r = -0.16, p < .01$ ) was found between years experience and first year job satisfaction. These findings may be explained by a perceived sense of disillusionment among experienced teachers regarding quantity and quality of paperwork help and support that they received during their first year.

One possible explanation for this discrepancy may be that first year SETs are still in the “honeymoon phase” of their jobs. Since everything is brand new to them, problems lurk everywhere. These individuals may be grateful for any and all help that they receive. They may be so overwhelmed with their daily responsibilities that they aren’t fully aware of the questions that they should be asking. It might be said that they still “don’t know what they don’t know.”

However, as SETs mature, they come across many paperwork situations for which they were never prepared. Behavioral manifestations, eligibility meetings, and transition plans are three examples of special education paperwork that may require extra training and practice for beginning SETs to master.

Seasoned teachers become more aware of gaps in their knowledge base. Rather than having an unconditional sense of appreciation for any and all received help, they may begin to think, “why didn’t anyone tell me this before?”

This hypothesis may also help explain why the sample found their co-workers to be such extremely valuable sources of advice and support. It is possible that many experienced SETs felt that they have an obligation to help those new to the field to avoid the mistakes and bad experiences that they encountered. This sentiment was expressed by numerous interview participants and open-ended survey responses.

It is suggested that colleges and other teacher preparation programs increase the frequency and amount of paperwork training for their teacher candidates. Their failure to make this a priority in their curriculum was reflected in both interview comments and a relatively low rating among paperwork helpfulness in the survey. Some respondents reported not even seeing a single IEP during their entire preparation program.

There are many activities that may improve teacher candidates exposure and familiarity with special education paperwork during their training period. Teacher preparation programs may benefit from working closely with local school districts to acquire authentic examples of IEP paperwork for their candidates to see and on which to practice. Authentic IEP pages may take some of the mystery out of the bureaucratic expectations of special educators. They may give candidates an opportunity to merge classroom theory with real world practicality.

Results of this study promote the position that paperwork and other special education non-instructional duties be thoroughly and repeatedly covered throughout a

candidate's entire preparation program. Just as most programs have specific courses or assignments to familiarize candidates with topics such as lesson planning, classroom management and assessment, paperwork and the legal responsibilities of the special educator should carry greater importance in the curriculum. This is especially encouraged for many of the current alternate certification programs, where time and practice may be limited.

Another activity that may help future special educators become better at paperwork is mock IEPs. Practice makes perfect. Mock IEPs give candidates a chance to familiarize themselves with paperwork in a non-threatening, instructional environment. Actual parents of special needs children might also be invited to participate. These volunteers have a unique perspective on the IEP process and can be extremely useful with their guidance and experiences. Candidates might choose to ask questions and seek advice from them and take advantage of their personal knowledge and experience.

#### *Research Question Number Six*

The sixth research question of the study was, "Does a school policy of a reduced caseload positively affect the morale of first year special education teachers?" No prior research was found that directly addressed the use of reduced caseloads as a method to support first year SETs of their paperwork responsibilities. The benefits of a reduced caseload were found to be mixed for the current study,

Only 16 teachers (9%) reported being intentionally assigned a reduced caseload during their first year. Mann-Whitney  $U$  tests did not reveal that teachers assigned a reduced caseload were assigned less IEPs ( $U = 1181.50, p = .557$ ) or spent less minutes



on paperwork ( $U = 1185.00, p = .602$ ) compared to other members of the sample.

Furthermore, there were no specific comments found in the interviews or the open-ended prompts to validate a reduced caseload as an important accommodation to improve the morale of first year SETs.

However, Mann-Whitney  $U$  tests did reveal that SETs assigned a reduced caseload had a higher total helpfulness score ( $U = 97.00, p = .017$ ) and a higher job satisfaction score ( $U = 809.00, p = .025$ ) when compared with first year SETs assigned a full caseload. In addition, sample responses were extremely optimistic when asked if a reduced caseload could increase the amount of time that they had to devote to teaching. Teachers predicted that a reduced caseload would enable them to spend on average, more than three additional hours on instructional duties. Additional research is needed to explore the potential benefits of a reduced caseload for first year SETs

### Limitations of the Study

#### *Response Rate*

The response rate for survey was 9%, with a margin of error of 7%. Although several efforts, detailed in the results chapter, have been put forth to demonstrate how the current sample is similar to the population at large, a large sample size would increase the validity and the ability to generalize the findings.

The limited budget of the researcher limited additional communications with members of the sample. It was therefore impossible to complete an analysis of respondents versus non-respondents, or to send electronic reminders that may have increased the final response rate.

### *Reliability*

Although Cronbach's alpha scores for the perceived helpfulness prompts and job satisfaction prompts were relatively high (.80 and .78, respectively), the job stress prompts were not as reliable. Cronbach's alpha for these eight variables was  $\alpha = .55$ . Therefore, this factor needs to be taken into consideration when making any conclusions based upon the job stress scores of the sample.

### Implications for Further Research

The data surmised in this study found that paperwork is perceived as a major challenge for special educators. Although, there are many recorded examples of how paperwork interferes with instructional duties and increases the level of stress, it does not appear to be the main cause for leaving the field.

Future researchers would benefit from exploring some of the specific suggestions of this study to determine which ones best support SETs to meet their paperwork demands. Focusing on the potential benefits of a specific strategy in isolation, such as a reduced caseload, the use of mentors or biennial IEPs may provide more detailed information regarding the overall effectiveness.

It would also be useful for researchers to determine what pre-service SETs already know about professional paperwork. If future special educators understand the complex bureaucratic requirements of their job before stepping into the classroom, they may develop less job dissonance, and a greater sense of morale.

## Appendix A

### Contents of Online Survey

The Effects of Paperwork Demands on the Morale of First-Year Special Educators.

#### RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to study the effects of paperwork on the morale of first year special education teachers. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take approximately 15 minutes of your valuable time to complete this computer-based survey.

#### RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

#### BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits other than the advancement of knowledge regarding the needs of special education teachers.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

All data gathered from this computer-based survey will be kept confidential. For coded identifiable data (1) your name will not be included on the surveys and other collected data; (2) a code will be placed on the survey and other collected data; (3) through the use of an identification key, the researcher will be able to link your survey to your identity;

and (4) only the researcher will have access to the identification key.

While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmissions. To further protect your responses, it is recommended that participants close the internet browser used to open this survey after completing it.

## PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party for participating in the research.

As a token of our appreciation for your time and efforts, at the conclusion of this survey you will receive information regarding a website that provides links to dozens of useful freebies designed specifically for teachers!

## CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Richard L. Mehrenberg, a doctoral candidate from the Special Education program in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. He may be reached at [rmehrenb@gmu.edu](mailto:rmehrenb@gmu.edu) or (703)794-8313 for questions or to report a research-related problem.

In addition, participants may direct questions to the dissertation adviser, Dr. Margo Mastropieri, Ph.D. at (703)993-2063

You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at (703)993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

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## CONSENT

We recommend that you print this page to keep a copy of this informed consent for your records.

If you want to document your informed consent, please print a copy of this form, sign it and mail it to:

Dr. Margo A. Mastropieri  
George Mason University  
College of Education and Human Development  
2203 West Building, MSN 6D2  
Fairfax, VA 22030-4444

I meet all criteria for participation in this study as explained in the invitational e-mail.

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

- I agree  I disagree
- 

Section 1 of 4 (Current Demographics)-Please provide us with some relevant background information about yourself.

I am...

- male  female

Current age in years

Counting the current school year, For how many years have you been a public-school special education teacher?

- 1  2  3  4  5

My race/ethnicity is...

- African-American  
 Hispanic

- White, non-Hispanic
- Native American
- Asian American
- other, please specify:

State in which I teach...(two letter postal abbreviation)

Do you currently have the same teaching position as you did your first year as a special educator?

- yes  no

---

Section 2 of 4 (First Year Demographics) Thinking back to your first year as a public-school special education teacher, answer the following questions as they pertained to that time period.

---

Prior to my first day as a special educator, my highest level of completed education was:

- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Educational Specialist
- Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)

other, please specify

Prior to my first day as a special educator, I had completed all requirements for a professional special education teaching license (passed all coursework, passed all necessary Praxis tests ,and successfully student-taught).

yes       no

Prior to my first day as a special educator, I had one or more additional teaching certification other than special education.

Yes     No

Prior to my first day as a special educator, I met the criteria of “highly qualified” as defined by No Child Left Behind legislation for all classes in which I served as the teacher of record.

Yes     No     Not Sure

During my first year as a special educator, I taught...(check all that apply)

early childhood/pre-school

elementary school (K-5)

middle school (6-8)



- high school (9-12)

During my first year as a special educator, I taught students with the following area(s) of disability. (check all that apply)

- Learning Disabilities
- Emotional Disabilities
- Mental Retardation
- Autism
- Severe Disabilities
- Speech and Language Disorders
- Developmentally Delayed
- Orthopedic Impairment/Physical Disabilities
- Visual Impairment
- Hearing Impairment
- Visual and Hearing Impairments
- Other Health Impaired (including Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Multiple Disabilities

During my first year as a special educator, I taught in the following teaching environments...(check all that applied)

- self-contained classroom
- resource room
- co-teaching inclusion setting
- consultant
- monitor

other:

I consider myself a career switcher

- Yes  No
- 

Section 3 of 4 (Paperwork Demands of Special Education Teachers)-In this section of the survey, we want to know about the amount and extent of paperwork for which you were responsible during your first year as a special educator.

For the purposes of this survey, we are only interested in paperwork specifically associated with special education such as writing IEPs, behavior management plans and long term goals.

We are not concerned with paperwork normally associated with all teachers such as grading tests or creating lesson plans.

To what degree do you feel that excessive paperwork is problematic for a first-year special educator?

- Not a problem
- A small problem
- A moderate problem
- A severe problem

To what degree do you feel that excessive paperwork interferes with the instructional obligations of a first-year special educator?

- Does not interfere
- Interferes a small amount
- Interferes a moderate amount
- Interferes a severe amount

How many IEPs did you write as a first-year special education teacher?

During your first year, estimate how many IEPs were written by a veteran special education teacher.

Did your school intentionally assign you less paperwork, as a first year special educator?

Yes  No  Don't Know

One national survey estimates that the average special educator spends 300 minutes per week completing forms and doing administrative paperwork. Estimate how many minutes per week you spent on these tasks during your first year.

If your school had such a policy in place during your first year, estimate how many additional minutes per week you would be able to spend on instructional purposes such as planning, grading and consulting.



To what extent did the following resources provide preparation or support in regards to completing paperwork your first year as a special educator?

college courses

Very unhelpful  Unhelpful  Helpful  Very Helpful  Not

Applicable

student-teaching experience

Very unhelpful  Unhelpful  Helpful  Very Helpful  Not

Applicable

school-level administrator

Very unhelpful  Unhelpful  Helpful  Very Helpful

department head

Very unhelpful  Unhelpful  Helpful  Very Helpful  Not

Applicable

assigned mentor

- Very unhelpful  Unhelpful  Helpful  Very Helpful  Not

Applicable

other teachers

- Very unhelpful  Unhelpful  Helpful  Very Helpful

beginning teacher induction program

- Very unhelpful  Unhelpful  Helpful  Very Helpful

- Not Applicable

Which one factor most enabled you to handle the paperwork demands of your job and why?

---

Section 4 of 4 (Morale)-We will now ask you question related to morale such as job

satisfaction, job stress, and intent to leave special education.

---

Thinking back to your first year as a special educator, assess the level of job satisfaction that you received from each of the following factors.

salary and fringe benefits

very dissatisfied  dissatisfied  satisfied  very satisfied

importance and challenge

very dissatisfied  dissatisfied  satisfied  very satisfied

working conditions

very dissatisfied  dissatisfied  satisfied  very satisfied

opportunity to use past training and advancement

very dissatisfied  dissatisfied  satisfied  very satisfied

job security and permanence

very dissatisfied  dissatisfied  satisfied  very satisfied

supervisor(s)

- very dissatisfied  dissatisfied  satisfied  very satisfied

opportunity for developing new skills

- very dissatisfied  dissatisfied  satisfied  very satisfied

the pride and respect I received from my family and friends by being in this profession

- very dissatisfied  dissatisfied  satisfied  very satisfied

relationships with colleagues

- very dissatisfied  dissatisfied  satisfied  very satisfied

What one factor provided the most job satisfaction during your first year and why?

Thinking back to your first year as a special educator, assess how often you encountered the following experiences...

I carried school problems home with me.

- almost never  occasionally  fairly often  frequently  almost

always



My sense of humor helped me to cope with stress at work.

almost never  occasionally  fairly often  frequently  almost  
always

My work made me frustrated.

almost never  occasionally  fairly often  frequently  almost  
always

Work-related stress made me physically sick.

almost never  occasionally  fairly often  frequently  almost  
always

I looked forward to going to work.

almost never  occasionally  fairly often  frequently  almost  
always

The amount of work I had to do interfered with how well it got done.

almost never  occasionally  fairly often  frequently  almost  
always

I engaged in exercise or another form of physical activity to deal with job-related stress.

almost never  occasionally  fairly often  frequently  almost  
always

I discussed topics that upset me at work with family, friends or co-workers.

- almost never    occasionally    fairly often    frequently    almost  
always

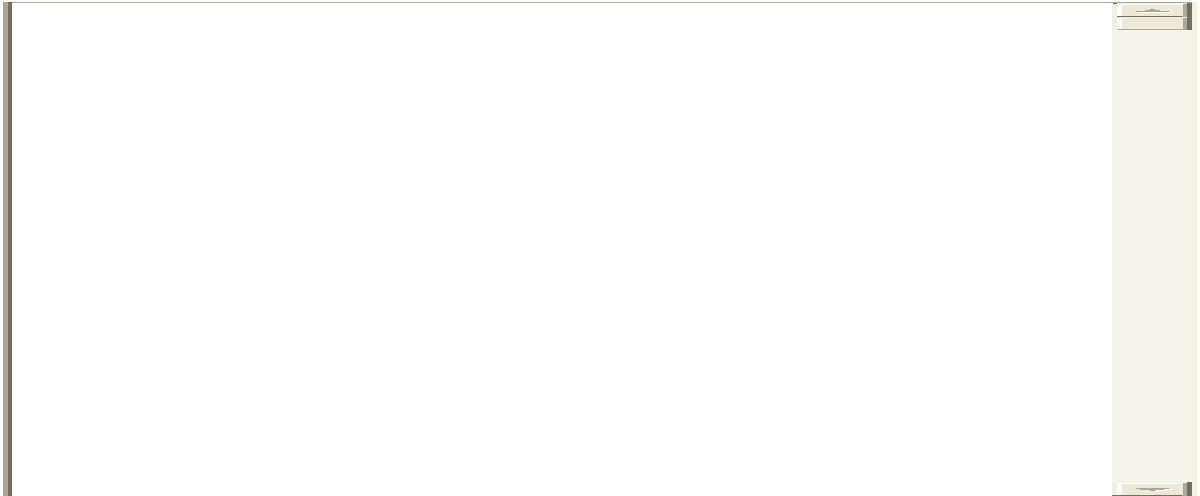
What one factor best helped you to cope with job stress during your first year, and why?

Based on your current situation, please indicate which of the following comes closest to describing how long you plan to remain as a special education teacher.

- I plan to find a new job, as soon as possible, unrelated to either education or helping people with disabilities.
- I plan to transfer, as soon as possible, to a job related to general education.
- I plan to find a new job, as soon as possible, helping people with disabilities, but unrelated to education.
- I plan to stay in special education unless a significantly better opportunity comes along.
- I plan to remain a special education teacher until I retire.
- I plan to take on some type of leadership role related to the field, such as a department head, college professor, or director of special ed.

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If you would be willing to participate in a follow up phone interview of no more than 30 minutes, please include your name, phone number, email address, and the best day/time to be reached.



## Appendix B

### Contents of Invitational Postcard



College of Education and Human Development

4400 University Drive, MS 1D5

Fairfax, Virginia 22030

Dear Special Education Teacher,

Please check your school email account this week for an invitation to participate in a brief internet survey. We want to hear about the needs, challenges, and opinions of special education teachers, like you. If for some reason, you do not receive the invitation, please type in the link below.

Feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Richard L. Mehrenberg, Doctoral Candidate

George Mason University, Fairfax, VA

rmehrenb@gmu.edu (703) 794-8313

[LINK TO SURVEY HERE](#)

## Appendix C

### Contents of Invitational Email

**College of Education and Human Development**

4400 University Drive, MS 1D5

Fairfax, Virginia 22030

Dear Fellow Special Education Teacher,

Greetings! My name is Richard Mehrenberg. I teach students with learning disabilities at Osbourn High School in Manassas, Virginia. I am also a Ph.D. candidate in Education at George Mason University. I am conducting my dissertation research and I would like your help. I am very interested in learning about the experiences, attitudes, and support systems of new special education teachers.

A link is provided at the bottom of this letter that connects to an internet survey.

The survey is estimated to take no more than 15 minutes of your valuable time. However, you must complete the survey in one sitting.

To be eligible to participate in the survey, you must have no more than five years experience as a public school special education teacher (counting the current school year). As a token of my appreciation, I have also included a link to a special teachers'

freebie website. The website lists dozens of things like posters, books, maps, and DVDs that are designed especially for educators.

If you have any further questions that are not answered by this letter or by the survey itself, please feel free to contact me or my adviser, Dr. Margo Mastropieri, through the phone numbers or email addresses provided.

Thank you, in advance, for your consideration to participate in this important research. As a fellow special education teacher, I know how important and underappreciated our work is. With your help, we can improve conditions for our schools, our teachers, and most importantly, our students.

Sincerely,

Mr. Richard L. Mehrenberg, *M.Ed.*

rmehrenb@gmu.edu

(703) 794-8313

Dr. Margo Mastropieri, *Ph.D.*

mmastrop@gmu.edu

(703) 993-4136

## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

1. What is your opinion of the paperwork responsibilities of special education teachers? What are some specific experiences that have shaped that opinion? Has your opinions have changed over time, and if so, why?
2. What one factor has been the most valuable in helping you prepare for the paperwork demands of your job? Can you give an example of something beneficial that you learned or experienced in your pre-service training that helped prepare you for the bureaucratic duties of being a special education teacher?
3. Can you give an instance where you felt that your lessons were not as strong as you thought that they could have been because of the amount of time you had to spend on paperwork? Do you have any time management strategies that help you balance all of your professional demands?
4. What advice would you give a college student whom wanted to major in special education about the paperwork associated with the job? If they asked you if you would do it all over again, what would you tell them and why?
5. Professionally, where do you see yourself in five years? Why?

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

Richard L. Mehrenberg graduated from Slippery Rock University in 1993 with Bachelor of Science in Education with a dual major in Special Education and Elementary Education. In 1998, he earned a Master of Science in Education from the University of Virginia in the area of Gifted Education. In 2001, he was awarded National Board Certification in the area of Exceptional Needs Specialist.

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