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# Supporting Retention of Special Educators through a Multidimensional Preparation Model

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## Introduction

> We need to hire the most skilled teachers for students with disabilities. When we assign a first-year teacher to a challenging special education position or hire the only teacher who will accept a position in special education, we jeopardize not only the students' learning, but also, the teacher's career.
> (personal communication, school superintendent, April, 2000).

This comment by a school superintendent underscores a dual dilemma facing school administrators: hiring qualified teachers for students with disabilities and retaining those teachers as long-term faculty members. The shortage of qualified special education teachers has been a national policy issue since "the inception of the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (1975), and there is little to suggest that this scenario might improve" (Brownell et al., 2005). Compounding the adverse effects of this shortage is the tendency for special education teachers to leave their assignments at a higher rate than general education teachers (Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, & Willig, 2002). The continuing trend of attrition among special educators compels personnel who are responsible for teacher preparation to take actions aimed at reversing the exit tendency and at attracting the best and brightest beginning educators to instruct students with exceptionalities for the duration of their professional careers. The purpose of this paper is to describe a program developed by a private liberal arts university in the Midwest to prepare teachers for special education licensure to serve in rural school districts and to promote their retention in their teaching assignments.

**The issues and the needs**

To address our nation's critical shortage of special educators most states have developed programs for alternative teacher certification (Feistritzer, Haar, Hobar, & Losselyong, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education has endorsed alternative training programs that allow persons who hold non-educational degrees to complete licensure requirements by accelerating the certification process. The term "alternative teacher certification program" may refer to a range of program designs from "emergency certification to very sophisticated and well-designed programs that address the professional preparation need of the growing population of individuals who already have at least a baccalaureate degree and considerable life experience who want to become teachers" (Feistrizter, 1998, p.2).

A reported concern of candidates who complete alternative certification programs is the lack of support and continued training provided after they enter classrooms (Olson, 2000). Comparisons of attrition rates for graduates of traditional and alternative preparation programs indicate the length of the training program impacts teachers' longevity in their assignments. Darling-Hammond (1999) concluded that teachers who completed four or five year training programs are more likely to continue teaching than teachers who completed an accelerated alternative training program. An inference drawn from considering these results is the need to provide extended support, training, and mentorship to graduates after they complete their programs of study and enter classrooms.

The total numbers of graduates from traditional teacher preparation programs combined with the numbers of those who complete alternative teacher certification programs are still insufficient to fill existing vacancies in special education classrooms. "Nationwide, shortages (of

special education teachers) are reported in 98 percent of all school districts—with the greatest demand reported in the poorest schools" (Brownell et al, 2005).

Another dimension is added to the teacher shortage problem when the increasing rates of students qualifying for special education services are considered. There is a notable increase in the number of students who qualify for special education services when compared to the numbers of typically developing peers in general education classrooms (McLesky, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). The number of students who are eligible to receive special education services must be assigned to the number of available special education teachers. Thus, as caseload numbers increase, special educators may perceive leaving their positions as the only option for reducing the stress of individualizing instruction for too many students. Alleviating the chronic shortage of qualified special educators is one target for improving teacher retention; however, working conditions also contribute to high attrition rates.

As reported by Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, and Willing (2002), data collected during the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) enumerated the intent of 6 percent of special educators to leave their teaching assignments as soon as possible. Cited as reasons for their decisions were unmanageable workloads (17%), lack of full certification for their teaching assignments (13%) and providing educational service to students with four or more primary disabilities (42%). Coleman (2000) reported 40% of special educators leave the profession before their fifth year of teaching. To promote teacher retention, faculty in preparation programs are advised to make provisions for providing ongoing support, access to information and professional networking to candidates not only during their program of study, but after these candidates assume teaching positions as well.

In a qualitative study of factors relating to teacher attrition Eisenman and Thornton (1999) detailed a first year teacher's sense of isolation and frustration originating from a lack of confidence for effectively managing all of the responsibilities of teaching. Ludlow, Connor, and Schecter (2005) also cite perceptions of social and professional isolation and lack of access to professional development as contributory factors to the high attrition rate of special educators in rural schools. In rural schools it is common for only one special educator to be assigned to each campus. This practice limits opportunities to form those collaborative networks that have been cited for contributing to the sense of job satisfaction reported by general education teachers (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999).

**The teacher preparation model**

The teacher preparation model described in the following paragraphs was designed to address these conditions associated with the attrition rate for special education faculty members in rural schools: a chronic shortage of qualified special educators, perceptions of isolation from colleagues, lack of a collaborative professional network, and a lack of access to continued professional development. In a focused attempt to instill pre-service special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy as they assume their initial classroom assignments and to provide an ongoing source of support to sustain their commitment to educating students with exceptionalities, the model incorporated these fundamentals:

1. To assure the integrity of the program of study: A comprehensive curriculum was developed and aligned with state and national standards for teacher preparation. Course objectives and outcomes were aligned with standards set by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the Council for Exceptional Children and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

2. To reduce candidates' perceptions of isolation and disassociation from their professional peers: Candidates from geographically distant school districts completed the 36 credit hour program as a cohort over a two-year period of time. Learning community principles were embedded in the program of instruction to foster a sense of collegiality and shared knowledge construction for cohort members. Candidates completed program requirements in a hybrid model of instruction which utilized both seated sessions and online instruction.
3. To promote maintenance of a professional network: Following graduation candidates are able to maintain their learning communities through use of an informal electronic peer mentoring network. A university faculty member serves as a liaison for providing links to professional development opportunities and resource acquisition. This network is continually accessible, and may be used for professional as well as social collaboration.

Drury University is a private liberal arts institution located in Central Missouri. Through its main campus in Springfield, Missouri and satellite campuses at six distant locations, faculty in the College of Education and Child Development prepare educators to serve in classrooms in rural schools across the state. Most of the school districts in the central region of the state are small schools which employ from two to four special educators. Area school superintendents responding to a needs assessment conducted prior to the development of the graduate program in special education reported on-going difficulty filling special education positions. These reports prompted university faculty to offer a graduate program of study preparing candidates for state licensure in special education for mild-moderate cross categorical disabilities.

The graduate program combines instruction in seated classes with e-learning delivered through WebCT. Candidates are assigned to a continuous cohort group to complete the two-year program of study. The intended outcomes from application of the hybrid instructional model are to provide instruction in the most current, compliant educational practices, to preserve opportunities for candidates' personal interaction during learning and to create an ongoing network for maintaining their connectivity as a learning community following graduation.

The growing presence and positive impact of virtual learning communities in teacher training programs is detailed in the following discussion. "Today, it would be rare to find a professional development project of any magnitude and duration that does not use at least some generic Internet technologies to foster dialogue and/or information sharing" (Schlager & Fusco, 2003, p. 207). With regard to professional development opportunities for teachers, particularly special education teachers, the advent of Information Technology (IT) has provided numerous potential models that can benefit practitioners.

As noted by Glazer and Hannafin (2006), "Professional development typically offered as a detached workshop activity that is not connected to a teacher's pedagogy or to student achievement has not produced desired outcomes" (as cited in Vavasseur & MacGregor, 2008, p. 517). This finding illustrates the necessity of professional development that is related primarily to the teachers' work experience and knowledge base. Vavasseur and MacGregor describe the ongoing shift toward creating communities of active teacher learners, including what they term "communities of practice" (p. 519). The ideal environment for this type of community building is found online. A community of practice is "a group of people in a professional environment who come together to share experience and expertise" (p. 519).

Information technology is a ubiquitous presence in contemporary society and can only be expected to increase its permeation of the educational landscape. As noted by Feldman (2005), "IT is making it increasingly easy to work together across distance, thus increasing the value and functionality of "invisible colleges" based on mutual research interests" (p. 66). Special education teachers, especially those completing their training via the cohort model as exemplified at Drury University, need thorough training in the online communication medium to promote retention and collegiality, and to reduce, or mitigate, feelings of isolation. The model currently utilized by Drury University could best be described as a "virtual community", in this case a virtual community composed of special educators.

**Strengths of virtual communities**

Many articles described what is known as the "community of practice". This is especially pertinent for educators. According to Schlager and Fusco (2003), "one's work and one's professional development are inextricably entwined with those with whom one works" (p. 204).

Through the usage of online professional development effective professional development can be facilitated if those designing and implementing it understand effective professional development, the existing projects that reflect it, and the local professional norms and practices that support or inhibit it (Schlager & Fusco, 2003, p. 205). As these researchers argue, "teacher professional development is more than a series of training workshops, institutes, meetings, and in-service days. It is a process of learning how to put knowledge into practice through engagement *in* practice within a community of practitioners" (p. 205).

Participation in communities has been cited as an integral factor in achieving effective, sustainable professional development (Schlager & Fasco, 2003). This is crucial for special educators who typically work in isolation from the regular education faculty of public schools

and face increased pressure leading to "teacher burnout". Sustainability should be the hallmark of any virtual community.

**Promoting retention**

Hiser (2008) states that, "The online medium nurtures dialogue among faculty coming from different disciplines and levels of experience" (p. 29). Most of the participants in the special education cohort at Drury University are beginning their careers in special education. They could benefit from online interaction with their colleagues and also more experienced peers who have already completed the program.

Describing faculty development at a community college in Hawaii, Hiser itemizes online activities that have been implemented, including "a happy blog" for faculty to post successful experiences, an online coaching database, "open classroom" calendar allowing faculty to connect with mentors, online teleconferences, and archives. One of the most important features of the Hawaiian intervention was online postings providing, "a valuable form of reflection, and the quasi-anonymity of the online environment" which "makes it easier to be honest and ask questions" (p. 29) all features that would improve retention rates of special education teachers if properly implemented.

Writing from experience in the medical field Orly Avitzur, M.D. (2008) describes online communities that "offer members empathy, understanding, and hope based on shared experiences" (p. 11). These characteristics, if implemented through a virtual community, could impact retention rates of special educators.

**Promoting collegiality**

Collegiality has been defined by Bess (1992) as, "attending to the work of others, engaging in intellectual reciprocity, providing timely feedback to colleagues, being open to peer

review of teaching and sharing new ideas and teaching materials with colleagues" (as cited in Grünberg and Armellini, 2004, p. 598).

Collegiality can be promoted through creation of virtual communities. As noted by Vasseur and MacGregor (2008), "A key element of building collaboration is the creation of a network where the tone is welcoming and relaxed" (p. 520). The key component of the special education virtual community is that of a welcoming environment.

Even something as mundane as e-mail can be an effective means of promoting collegiality. As noted by Grünberg and Armellini (2004), "email may foster collegiality because it can help overcome restraints to human communication" (p. 598).

**Preventing isolation**

Lefkowits (2008) catalogued fears that using technology to support individualization and customization would isolate people from one another. The real trend however has been "the rise of dozens of new voluntary communities, or social networks" that are "bringing us together in unique, technology-driven ways" (p. 18). She goes on to describe "purposeful communities" as those with a collective ability to develop and use assets to produce outcomes important to all community members. Such communities also contribute to a sense of "collective efficacy", that is, community members believe that, "together they can make a difference" (p. 19).

Isolation can be mitigated through online community as advocated by Vasseur and MacGregor (2008). They contend, "Through a community of practice teachers can become less isolated and more inclined to discuss new ideas, can solve problems that arise concerning technology integration, and can form a support system to foster new ideas" (p. 519).

Mitigation of isolation can result in what Löfström and Nevgi (2006) describe as "meaningful learning". Meaningful learning "entails learner activity and intentionality,

application of constructivist principles, collaboration, dialogue, reflection, connection to context and transferability of knowledge" (p. 315).

In particular, Löfström and Nevgi (2006) advocate collaboration. They argue:

> Learning is *collaborative* when students engage in knowledge-building communities in which they share their knowledge and skills with other members of the community. Learning is considered a social, *dialogical* process in which learners benefit from engagement in knowledge-building communities. In web-based learning environments, collaborative learning and dialogue can be supported by offering synchronous and asynchronous discussion platforms and shared file-management spaces. (p. 315)

Dickey (2004) advocated the use of web-logs (blogs) to eliminate feelings of isolation. Specifically addressing the needs of the distance learning environment, she stated, "Blogs may offer new strategies for bridging feelings of frustration and isolation by offering more engaging and interactive content and by supporting the emergence of individual voices in a distance-learning environment" (p. 280).

All of these features, from virtual community to blogs, from email messages to networking sites such as Facebook, illustrate the general trend toward online collaboration and team-building. With particular reference to special educators the advent of virtual community has resulted in greater collegiality, reduced isolation, and greater retention. The synergistic power of a virtual community has had a profound impact on the special education cohort program at Drury University.

**Graduates' evaluation of the program**

Because e-learning models vary widely in design, purpose and function, measuring their success is complicated. O'Neal, Jones, Miller and others (2007) suggest as a measurement of

success the degree of satisfaction expressed by members of the learning community. Russell (1999) reviewed 355 studies of effectiveness of distance education. He reported that the learning outcomes of students in e-learning models were similar to the outcomes for students receiving instruction in traditional classrooms. Phipps and Merisotis (1999) concluded that distance education and traditional classroom instruction produce similar outcomes in terms of student attitudes and satisfaction.

One author surveyed graduates of the initial special education cohort to determine their satisfaction with the hybrid model. Graduates provided the following comments:

> "I like personal interaction in my classes. The online component gave me the flexibility I needed for my family and the seated component let me discuss my ideas face to face with other students".
>
> "I liked being able to express my true feelings and ask questions without feeling embarrassed in the online sessions".
>
> "I came to depend on the immediate access to teachers, other students and assignments using WebCT."
>
> "I felt more comfortable expressing my opinions in class and online because I knew all of the other students. I didn't have to adjust to new students with every class".
>
> "I got so much more from the theory by hearing other student's (sic) give their own examples and interpretations when we posted our reflections online".
>
> "I felt like everyone in our group was truly interested in learning and helping the other students because we studied together for so long".
>
> "I didn't like using WebCT at first because I'm a people person, but I got used to the online discussions instead of classroom discussions. I still prefer the live discussions

in class". (Special Education cohort surveys, 2006)

The collective comments of graduates completing an end-of- program survey were analyzed for attitudinal commonalities. Commonalities were decided when five or more of the graduates (n=11) expressed the same attitude. The following were noted:

- Graduates favored the flexibility for scheduling their study time offered by the online component of the program (reported by 11 of 11 respondents).
- Graduates favored preservation of personal interaction allowed by the seated component of the program (reported by 9 of 11 respondents).
- Graduates concluded that the hybrid program design adequately prepared them for teaching students with exceptionalities (reported by 11 of 11 respondents).
- Graduates valued the sense of community developed during the two years of study and expressed intentions to maintain their collegial network (reported by 11 of 11 respondents).
- Graduates expressed concern that they were not fully trained to used WebCT prior to the start of their course of study (reported by 8 of 11 respondents)
- Graduates demonstrated a range competencies for using technology as a learning tool. Those who were less skilled reported a negative impact on their quality of their work (reported by 6 of 11 respondents).

**Implications for future practice.**

For producing more qualified special educators and reducing the attrition rate: The long-term effects on the attrition rate of special educators trained using this hybrid model of teacher preparation are yet to be determined, as the first graduates completed their program of study in 2006. The status of the initial graduates is being tracked for future analysis.

As the availability of the model becomes more widely known, it is expected that enrollment in the program will increase.

For reducing the sense of professional isolation and lack of professional development opportunities: Graduates of the initial special education cohort continue to communicate with one anther, exchange ideas for effective practice and provide support and encouragement to one another. Plans for future refinement of the networking system are developing.

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