

Job Design: An Administrator's Guide to Supporting and Retaining Special Educators

Elizabeth A. Bettini, MA¹, Kristi Cheyney, MA¹, Jun Wang, MA¹,
 and Christopher Leko, MA¹

Abstract

Special education teacher attrition has numerous negative impacts for students and schools. Administrators play an essential role in supporting special educators, but they seldom receive adequate preparation to provide this support effectively. The authors synthesize job characteristics theory, an area of research conducted by organizational psychologists. This theory is used to provide practical suggestions for administrators interested in supporting and retaining special educators.

Keywords

administration, management, reform, school, burnout, teacher(s), education/training/preparation

In her 4 years as principal of an urban middle school, Jodie has become increasingly frustrated by her efforts to support the special education staff. The special education team is disgruntled and has frequent turnover. She is tired of spending time and money finding and training new teachers. This year, she had to hire a long-term substitute for one position, because no certified staff members applied. Jodie wants to provide an effective education for students with disabilities, but without a committed staff, she struggles to implement reforms. Jodie knows that her students with disabilities are struggling academically, and she knows that their success depends on high-quality special educators, but she doesn't know how to overcome the persistent challenges on her special education team. She wonders if perhaps the problem is not the special educators, but the ways in which she has been supporting them. (See Note 1.)

Jodie's position is not unique; nationwide, the shortage of qualified special educators has hovered at a level of about 10% for the past several decades (Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). Attrition is a major contributor to this shortage, because more than half of new special educators leave within the first 4 years of their careers (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2005). The attrition of special educators creates a number of serious consequences for students and schools. Variability in the teaching workforce can reduce schools' ability to provide effective support for students, because less experienced teachers must fill leadership roles when experienced special educators leave. Staffing changes disrupt school reform efforts, making changes difficult to

sustain over time, ultimately contributing to the gap between research and practice (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2007; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

However, administrators can play an essential role in preventing special education teacher attrition. In a synthesis of research on in this area, Billingsley (2004) found that administrative support is one of the largest controllable influences on attrition. Unfortunately, most states do not require administrators to take course work in special education as part of their certification (Kaye, 2002), and many administrators report feeling unprepared to support special educators (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2006).

Job design, an area of research conducted in organizational psychology, provides insights into how administrators can proactively support special educators in ways that reduce attrition and enhance effectiveness (Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). This research has consistently shown that supervisors can create meaningful work environments for their employees (Grissom, 2012), and employees who

¹University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

Corresponding Author:

Elizabeth A. Bettini, MA, University of Florida, 1403 Norman Hall, PO Box 117050, Gainesville, FL 32611.
 Email: lizbettini@ufl.edu

experience their work as meaningful are more effective and less likely to leave (Humphrey, Nahrgang & Morgeson, 2007).

Job Characteristics Theory

The characteristics of jobs affect employees' perceptions of the importance of their work. When employees perceive their work as meaningful, they are less likely to leave and more likely to feel committed. Job design theorists have examined a number of relevant job characteristics of special interest, including

- social support,
- autonomy,
- feedback,
- task significance, and
- task interdependence,

because they have strong links to employees' performance and attrition (Humphrey et al., 2007).

Social Support

Social support is the extent to which an employee participates in supportive, reciprocal relationships with colleagues. Humphrey et al.'s (2007) meta-analysis of job design research found that social support is more highly correlated with turnover intentions than any other job characteristic. Social support improves organizational commitment and reduces absenteeism, possibly by mitigating the impact of stressful situations (Humphrey et al., 2007).

Social support plays a critical role in special educators' work experiences. Billingsley (2004) noted that special educators who perceive administrators as supportive are more committed, more satisfied with their jobs, and less likely to intend to leave. Supportive administrators may be essential for cultivating collegial environments (Billingsley, 2004; Gersten et al., 2001). However, collegial support is not something administrators can provide on an occasional basis; it must be an integral part of the school culture (Billingsley, 2004). Administrators can cultivate a supportive, collegial culture in many ways:

- **Express an interest in special educators as individuals:** Relationships with school leaders matter (Oplatka, 2006). Let special educators know that you care about them as people too!
- Provide social support:** The special educators at Jodie's school have always eaten lunch at a different time than other teachers, and their classrooms were isolated at the end of a hallway, far from the office. By reorganizing the schedule, such that special educators could join other staff members at lunchtime, and changing the locations of some classrooms, Jodie took the first steps toward integrating special educators into her school community.

Autonomy

Autonomy is the degree of control teachers have over their work. In other fields, high autonomy has been linked with performance and commitment. DeVaro, Li, and Brookshire (2007), in a large survey of British employees from a nationally representative sample of professions, found that organizations in which employees rated their jobs high on autonomy were more productive than organizations in which employees rated their jobs as having less autonomy.

Special educators' autonomy has eroded in recent years, as standards-based assessments have become a major force driving instructional decisions for all students (Shealey, McHatton, & Farmer, 2009; Valli & Buese, 2007). Special educators may become frustrated when a lack of autonomy limits their ability to use specialized expertise to support their students (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). However, it is still possible to afford special educators an appropriate level of autonomy by allowing wide latitude in how mandated standards may be taught. McLeskey and Waldron's (2012) profile of the principal of a highly performing, inclusive school found that the principal was "adamant and uncompromising" about her school vision, but she allowed great flexibility in how teachers could meet this vision (p. 54). Similarly, although all teachers must meet the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act and other legislative initiatives, administrators can facilitate autonomy by allowing special educators to determine the most effective ways to meet these demands. Specifically, administrators can take the following steps:

- **Include special educators in school social networks:** Ensure that special educators have equal access to public spaces during the same time periods as their colleagues. Include them fully in school social events.
- **Create time for special educators to collaborate with one another:** Special educators need opportunities to provide one another with the unique support necessary to do a unique job.
- **Include special educators in decisions about their work:** Involving special educators in conversations about their students, schedules, and curricula will enhance their sense of control over their work.
- **Trust special educators' unique knowledge:** Provided they produce positive student outcomes, encourage special educators to select the most appropriate ways of meeting students' needs. This is especially important for special educators, because many

of their students are likely to have unique needs that cannot be met by generic instructional mandates.

Support special educators' autonomy: Mr. Hughes has frequently argued that the district-mandated special education reading curriculum is not appropriate for some of his students. This year, Jodie decides to trust him. She tells him to use whichever curriculum he feels is most appropriate and to provide weekly graphs of students' progress; as long as students make adequate progress toward their individualized education program (IEP) goals, Mr. Hughes may select the method of instruction.

Feedback

Autonomy without accountability may be a recipe for disaster. Feedback ensures that autonomous actions align with school goals. Feedback also provides insights into how one's work contributes to meaningful outcomes (Parker & Ohly, 2008). Humphrey et al. (2007) found that feedback has a larger impact on performance than other job characteristics.

Novice special educators value feedback from administrators and expect them to communicate the criteria for success (Firestone & Pennell, 1993). Unfortunately they report that most of the feedback they receive comes from colleagues (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004) and students (Firestone & Pennell, 1993). By providing regular feedback to special educators, administrators communicate that special educators' work is important. Research in education indicates that specific, positive, corrective, and immediate feedback is more effective at changing teachers' practices than general, noncorrective, or delayed feedback (Scheeler, Ruhl, & McAfee, 2004). Administrators can provide feedback to special educators in several ways:

- **Meet with special educators to discuss students' progress:** Holding regular meetings to discuss students' progress communicates that special educators' work is valued. Offer praise, suggestions, and logistical support, not evaluation, during these meetings.
- **Use formal evaluations to help teachers improve:** In an accountability context, policy makers, researchers, and practitioners are all struggling to understand how evaluations can enhance teacher quality. In the complexities of these conversations, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the goal of evaluation is to help individual teachers improve their instruction (Benedict, Thomas, Kimerling, & Leko, 2013; Holdheide, Warburton, & Buzick, 2012). During formal evaluations, offer special educators specific advice about how to improve. If student data are part of the evaluation process, help special educators to interpret the data in ways that are meaningful for their students, indicating specific steps they can take to help students' progress.

Provide effective feedback: Jodie did not feel that she knew enough about special education progress monitoring to support this process, so she asked the school psychologist to hold monthly meetings with each special educator, to discuss students' progress monitoring data and to provide support and feedback as needed. Jodie joined these meetings occasionally to improve her own knowledge of the students in her school.

Task Significance

Task significance refers to perceptions of the importance of one's work. Employees who perceive their work as socially significant express more positive feelings about their jobs (Saavedra & Kwun, 2000), have higher rates of helping behaviors (Grant, 2008), are more satisfied with their jobs (DeLoach, 2003), and may also have improved overall performance (Grant, 2008; Grant & Sumanth, 2009). Teachers value task significance more than many other professionals; educators are more likely than private sector professionals to value making a contribution to society (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006). This is especially true for special educators, who often choose this career to serve those in need (Fish & Stephens, 2010).

Task significance is closely tied to feedback, because feedback is the means by which one knows how one's work affects others. In addition to providing feedback, leaders can also enhance employees' perceptions of the significance of their work by engaging in ethical leadership and by using participatory decision-making processes. When employers are perceived as ethical, employees perceive their work as more significant, which in turn enhances performance (Grant & Sumanth, 2009). Ethical leadership may affect task significance by increasing employees' value for the organization's mission (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010).

Participatory decision making also enhances task significance. Employees who are involved in decision making tend to view their work as more significant, which in turn increases job satisfaction (Wright & Kim, 2004). Studies in the private sector have linked participatory decision making to increased retention (Griffeth, 2000), and a large educational study found that when school leaders are perceived as effective, participatory decision making improves retention (Grissom, 2012). Administrators can support special educators' sense of task significance by taking the following measures:

- **Emphasize ethics in your own work and the work of your employees:** Special education law is an obvious area in which ethics is required. Become familiar with special education law, and communicate respect for it through both words and actions.
- **Include special educators in decision making beyond special education:** Special educators' involvement should not end with special education

issues; their work is relevant for the entire school community. Therefore, special educators should be involved in school decisions. Include a special educator on the leadership team. Consult with special educators when making changes in the general education curriculum.

Communicate the significance of special educators' work:

This year, Jodie focuses on making sure that special education law is respected. Before the year starts, she meets with the special education team to review each student's IEP and determine what resources will be needed. At this meeting, Jodie realizes that a teacher needs training in reading instruction, so she arranges for him to receive expert coaching. Jodie also asks the receptionist to help teachers schedule IEP meetings, to ensure that all IEPs are completed on time.

Task Interdependence

Task interdependence refers to the extent to which one's work affects and is affected by others (Oldham & Hackman, 2010). Jobs that include elements of task interdependence have higher organizational commitment, lower absenteeism, and reduced turnover intentions (Humphrey et al., 2007). These benefits are more likely to occur when employees are mutually dependent on one another (Kiggundu, 1981) and mutually responsible for outcomes (Wageman, 1999).

These findings have implications for special educators in collaborative roles, who rely on general education teachers to support their students. Scruggs et al. (2007) found that most coteaching arrangements use the "one teach, one assist" model, with special educators acting as assistants. In such arrangements, without parity between special and general educators, collaborative relationships are unlikely to be successful (Murawski & Hughes, 2009). Administrators can promote more effective, mutual, interdependence in several ways:

- **Cultivate a balance of power and responsibility between collaborators:** Communicate that teachers in collaborative assignments are equals. Teachers who share responsibility for instruction should also share responsibility for the results of all students' assessments.
- **Support shared responsibility through collaborative professional learning:** Conduct data-based professional learning experiences that support collaborators in using student data to improve their instruction (Leko & Brownell, 2009).
- **Provide sufficient resources and planning time for collaborators:** Implement and safeguard a schedule that allows collaborators time to coplan.

Support interdependent work: To provide meaningful collaborative professional learning and to ensure that coteachers were equally responsible for students, Jodie invited

special educators to attend data team meetings with their coteachers, and she invited general education coteachers to attend special education progress monitoring meetings.

Conclusions

Research in other fields suggests that leaders have the power to structure work in ways that enhance motivation, by strengthening experiences of social support, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task interdependence. Although the suggestions we have outlined may be time-consuming, many of them can be implemented by principals, vice principals, curriculum facilitators, or school psychologists. By sharing these responsibilities, leadership teams can provide special educators with supported and meaningful work roles. These efforts will pay dividends in the long run, in the increased motivation, commitment, and retention of special educators, and improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. This vignette is a fictionalized account. Some aspects of this vignette are based on authentic situations observed by the authors. Other aspects of the vignette (especially the changes Jodie makes) are drawn from relevant research. Jodie is a fictional person.

References

- Benedict, A. E., Thomas, R. A., Kimerling, J., & Leko, C. (2013). Trends in teacher evaluation: What every special education teacher should know. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 45*, 60–68.
- Billingsley, B. S. (2004). Special education teacher retention and attrition: A critical analysis of the research literature. *Journal of Special Education, 38*(1), 39–55.
- Billingsley, B., Carlson, E., & Klein, S. (2004). The working conditions and induction support of early career special educators. *Exceptional Children, 70*(3), 333–347.
- Boe, E., Cook, L. H., & Sunderland, R. J. (2005). *Turnover of special education teachers: New research on the extent and impact of exit attrition, transfer to general education, and school transfer*. Paper presented at the 2005 OSEP Project Directors Conference, Washington, DC.
- DeLoach, R. (2003). Job satisfaction among hospice interdisciplinary team members. *American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, 20*, 434–440.

- DeVaro, J., Li, R., & Brookshire, D. (2007). Analyzing the job characteristics model: New support from a cross-section of establishments. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 18(6), 986–1003.
- Firestone, W. A., & Pennell, J. R. (1993). Teacher commitment, working conditions, and differential incentive policies. *Review of Educational Research*, 63, 489–525.
- Fish, W. W. & Stephens, T. L. (2010). Special education: A career of choice. *Remedial and Special Education*, 31, 400–407.
- Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Retrieved September 1, 2012, from <http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/NIRN-MonographFull-01-2005.pdf>
- Gersten, R., Keating, T., Yovanoff, P., & Harniss, M. K. (2001). Working in special education: Factors that enhance special educators' intent to stay. *Exceptional Children*, 67(4), 549–567.
- Grant, A. M. (2008). The significance of task significance: Job performance effects, relational mechanisms, and boundary conditions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 108–124.
- Grant, A. M., & Sumanth, J. J. (2009). Mission possible? The performance of prosocially motivated employees depends on manager trustworthiness. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94, 927–944.
- Griffeth, R. W. (2000). Moderation of the effects of job enrichment by participation: A longitudinal field experiment. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 35, 73–93.
- Grissom, J. A. (2012). Revisiting the impact of participative decision making on public employee retention: The moderating influence of effective managers. *American Review of Public Administration*, 20, 1–19.
- Guarino, C. M., Santibanez, L., & Daley, G. A. (2006). Teacher recruitment and retention: A review of the recent empirical literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 76, 173–208.
- Holdheide, L., Warburton, S., & Buzick, H. (2012, July). *State considerations in designing and implementing evaluation systems that include teachers of students with disabilities*. Paper presented at the OSEP Project Directors' Conference, Washington, DC.
- Humphrey, S. R., Nahrgang, J. D., & Morgeson, F. P. (2007). Integrating motivational, social, and contextual work design features: A meta-analytic summary and theoretical expansion of the work design literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(5), 1332–1356.
- Kaye, E. K. (Ed.). (2002). *Requirements for certification of teachers, counselors, librarians, administrators for elementary and secondary schools* (67th ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kiggundu, M. N. (1981). Task interdependence and the theory of job design. *Academy of Management Review*, 6(3), 499–508.
- Leko, M. M., & Brownell, M. T. (2009). Crafting quality professional development for special educators: What school leaders should know. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 42, 64–70.
- McLeskey, J., & Billingsley, B. S. (2008). How does the quality and stability of the teaching force influence the research-to-practice gap? A perspective on the teacher shortage in special education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 29(5), 293–305.
- McLeskey, J., & Waldron, N. L. (2012). Setting the direction: The role of the principal in developing an effective, inclusive school. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 24, 51–60.
- Murawski, W. M., & Hughes, C. E. (2009). Response to intervention, collaboration, and co-teaching: A logical combination for successful systemic change. *Preventing School Failure*, 53, 267–277.
- Oldham, G. R., & Hackman, J. R. (2010). Not what it was and not what it will be: The future of job design research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31, 463–479.
- Oplatka, I. (2006). Going beyond role expectations: Toward an understanding of the determinants and components of teacher organizational citizenship behavior. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42, 385–423.
- Paarlberg, L. E., & Lavigna, B. (2010). Transformational leadership and public service motivation: Driving individual and organizational performance. *Public Administration Review*, 70, 710–718.
- Parker, S. K., & Ohly, S. (2008). Designing motivating jobs. In R. Kanfer, G. Chen, & R. Pritchard (Eds.), *Work motivation: Past, present, and future* (pp. 233–384). New York: Routledge.
- Saavedra, R., & Kwun, S. K. (2000). Affective states in job characteristics theory. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 21, 131–146.
- Scheeler, M. C., Ruhl, K. L., & McAfee, J. K. (2004). Providing performance feedback to teachers: A review. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 27(4), 396–407.
- Scruggs, T. E., Mastropieri, M. A., & McDuffie, K. A. (2007). Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms: A metasynthesis of qualitative research. *Exceptional Children*, 73(4), 392–416.
- Shealey, M. W., McHatton, P. A., & Farmer, J. (2009). What does “highly qualified” mean for urban special educators? *Urban Education*, 44, 410–426.
- Sindelar, P. T., Brownell, M. T., & Billingsley, B. (2010). Special education teacher education research: Current status and future directions. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 33(1), 8–24.
- Valli, L., & Buese, D. (2007). The changing roles of teachers in an era of high-stakes accountability. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44, 519–558.
- Wageman, R. (1999). Task design, outcome interdependence, and individual differences: Their joint effects on effort in task-performing teams (commentary on Huguet et al., 1999). *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 3(2), 132–137.
- Wakeman, S. Y., Browder, D. M., Flowers, C., & Ahlgrim-DeLzell, L. (2006). Principals' knowledge of fundamental and current issues in special education. *NASSP Bulletin*, 90, 153–174.
- Wright, B. E., & Kim, S. (2004). Participation's influence on job satisfaction: The importance of job characteristics. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 24, 18–40.