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## The Impact of Mentoring Program on New Special Education Teachers' Attrition in Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract

Since its inception, there has been problems in the field of special education related to teacher shortage and turnover. The causes of the Special Education Teachers (SETs) turnover are complex but it is known that attrition of SETs is the main cause which contributes to the issue. Many states have reported that SETs have suffered from the high rate of attrition. The high rates of attrition are prevalent among new SETs within their first five years of teaching (Prater, Harris, & Fisher, 2007). The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of the mentoring programs that being used with new SETs and to determine the reasons that lead SETs to leave the profession at a high rate of attrition. The participants consist of 56 SETs who graduated from different universities in Saudi Arabia, and have been teaching for five years or less. Results indicate that the mentoring programs will help SETs to stay longer in the field. In addition, these findings indicate that SETs who are participating in the mentoring program will not leave the profession at a high rate of attrition.

**Keywords:** special education teachers, Burnout, attrition, turnover, mentoring program

### وا هدى تأثير برامج التدريب الهيداني على الاحتراق النفسي لدى مهلمي التربية الخاصة الجدد في الهولكة العربية السعودية

#### المخلص

هناك عدد من المشاكل في ميدان التربية الخاصة، ومن هذه المشاكل ما هو متعلق بالاحتراق النفسي لدى مهلمي التربية الخاصة. هناك عدد من الأسباب المركبة التي تؤدي إلى هروب مهلمي التربية الخاصة من الميدان، ومن هذه الأسباب كما هو معروف الاحتراق النفسي الذي له دور كبير في هذه المشكلة. العديد من الدول تعاني من النسب العالية للاحتراق النفسي لدى مهلمي التربية الخاصة. هذه المعدلات العالية من الاحتراق النفسي منتشرة وسائدة بين مهلمي التربية الخاصة الجدد ضمن الخمس السنوات الأولى من التدريس (Prater, Harris, & Fisher, 2007). هدفت هذه الدراسة الحالية إلى الكشف عن مدى تأثير برامج التدريب الميداني على الاحتراق النفسي لدى مهلمي التربية الخاصة الجدد، وكذلك تحديد الأسباب التي تقود مهلمي التربية الخاصة الجدد إلى الخروج من ميدان التربية الخاصة بسبب المعدلات العالية للاحتراق النفسي. قد تكونت عينة الدراسة الأساسية من (54) معلم ومعلمة تربية خاصة من جميع أنحاء المملكة العربية السعودية والذين تخرجوا من مختلف جامعات المملكة. المعلمين المشاركين في هذه الدراسة من المعلمين الجدد، والذين لهم في مجال التدريس خمس سنوات أو أقل. أسفرت الدراسة عن النتائج التالية: وجود علاقة بين المشاركة في برامج التدريب الميداني والاحتراق النفسي لدى مهلمي التربية الخاصة الجدد، بحيث أن الاحتراق النفسي يقل لدى المعلمين المشاركين في برامج التدريب الميداني. وجود علاقة بين المشاركة في برامج التدريب الميداني والخروج من ميدان التربية الخاصة بنسب عالية من الاحتراق النفسي، حيث أن المعلمين الذين شاركوا في برامج التدريب الميداني لا يخرجون من الميدان بنسب عالية من الاحتراق النفسي.

كلمات مفتاحية: مهلمي التربية الخاصة، الخروج من الميدان، الاحتراق النفسي، برامج التدريب الميداني.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For more than two decades there has been a problem in the field of special education related to teacher turnover (Prater, Harris, & Fisher, 2007). Special education teachers leave the profession at the highest rate of attrition compared to teachers who teach in any other subject (Billingsely, 2007). Specifically, the special education field loses teachers because a considerable number of them are able to transfer to general education since special education teachers are often certified to teach general education. Reportedly, 4% of special education teachers transferred to general education (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008).

### 1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this project is to determine and identify the factors behind special education teachers leaving the profession at high rates of attrition. In addition, the other purpose of this study is to determine whether or not a mentoring program will reduce the attrition rate of SETs. Some studies have found that there is high satisfaction with a mentoring programs among beginning SETs because it has helped them to improve not only their perceptions of self-confidence and collaboration, but also to reinforce their intentions to remain in the field. The more effective mentoring program SETs receive, the stronger intentions they have to remain in the special education field (Dempsey, & Christenson-Foggett, 2011).

### 1.3 The Importance of the study

The shortage of special education teachers is important to study. Losing special education teachers and providing an unqualified teacher will provide unfair and harmful instruction for students with disabilities (Demik, 2008). The literature has noted that the special education field has a problem with the attrition of SETs (Dempsey, Kelly, & Carty, 2009). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) indicated that the national shortage of SETs is approximately 10.0% (as cited in Prater et al., 2007, p. 25). The special education shortage is a serious problem because it has grave negative implications for students with difficulties. The shortage of SETs is not an easy issue to solve. One of the most difficult issues is keeping the teacher in the field, since attrition is a major contributor to this problem (Kaff, 2004). However, there are many consequences of special education teachers' shortage: (a) the school districts might reduce the services to students who have disabilities or they may raise the classes size limits in order to compensate for the lack of qualified SETs; (b) the shortage affects student's achievement; (c) lack of educational experiences with students with disabilities; and (d) insufficient success of graduates in the workplace (Billingsely, 2004).

The shortage of SETs has been a big concern for approximately fifteen years for policymakers and researchers (Edgar & Pair, 2005). Turnover contains three components: (a) attrition (i.e., leaving the profession), (b) teaching area transfer (i.e., transfer to another teaching position), and (c) teaching migration (i.e., moving to another school) (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). The Commission on the Conditions for Special Education Teaching and Learning (2000) indicated that four of every ten special education teachers leave the profession before their fifth year of teaching. Moreover, between 30% to 60% of special education teachers who are in teaching do not plan to be in the profession within the next five years (as cited in Edgar and Pair, 2005, p. 163). In one study, Singer found that 43% of new special education teachers in Michigan and North Carolina left the profession within the first five years of teaching (as cited in Edgar and Pair, 2005, p. 163). In fact, about 9.3% of SETs leave the special education field at the end of the first year of teaching

(Thornton et al., 2007). 46% of new SETs do not want to stay in teaching until they retire and 40% of them decide and plan to leave the profession as soon as they find a better job. The other 6% of those teachers would like to leave the special education field as soon as possible (Bozonelos, 2008). During the study the percentage of increase in the annual turnover in special education was over three times more than the percentage increase in its workforce. The attrition rate of SETs during 1991 to 2004 had a high increase, which reached 10% in the annual rate of SET attrition and increasing requests for new hires of adequate SETs (Boe, 2014). In short, SETs have the largest number of teachers who have left the profession in the field of education (Payne, 2005).

Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, Hou, & Garvan, (2009) analyzed 596 first year SETs surveys. The purpose of this study was to identify the influence of classroom and school factors on beginning special education teachers' accomplishments and problems. The sample contained 596 first year SETs surveys. Five hundred twenty of the sample were female and 76 were male. Also, 512 were Caucasian, and 79 were the minority. Three hundred fifty of the sample were single, and 239 were married. 373 of the sample had bachelor's degrees, and 218 had graduate degrees (Griffin, et al., 2009).

Researchers found that 63% of beginning SETs chose the time as a considerable problem during their first year of teaching, while 45% of them ranked behavior management as a problem. Additionally, 36% of beginning SETs ranked curriculum, and 33% of them ranked specific student concentrated concerns as significant problems. There were 24% of the first year SETs had a problem with communication and collaboration with both GETs and administrators, and 23% of them ranked school climate as a serious problem. The assessment was a significant problem for 17% of those teachers, and the advocacy for their students was a problem for 13% of SETs. Researchers suggested that studying the difficulties that SETs face in their first year of teaching will help them to overcome these obstacles (Griffin et al., 2009).

White and Mason (2006) noted that "mentoring programs can help to reduce attrition rate especially for beginning special education teachers" (as cited in Amos, 2005, p. 15). Beginning special education teachers will benefit from an appropriate mentoring program that would reduce the attrition rate of special education teachers (Sheldrake, 2013).

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Participants**

All the respondents to the survey were new SETs who had been teaching in the field for five years or less, from various regions of Saudi Arabia. There were 56 new SETs when the survey was made available. A total of 54 respondents provided usable survey information. Two began, but did not complete the survey.

### **2.2 Instrument**

The questions that appear on the final survey for new SETs were formulated by the researcher and were determined after a series of discussions with the project advisory group, other survey instruments used in mentoring studies, and an extensive literature review. The survey questions probed a number of challenges for new SETs based on challenges identified in the literature as being important in other research. Some of these challenges identified as part of the survey were classroom management, behavior issues, meeting special needs, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), amount of classroom resources, communicating with colleagues, in-service professional development, communicating with administration, and paperwork.

### 2.3 Procedures

The procedures for collecting data included of the following steps: (a) after creating up the survey, the survey was checked to make sure that the translation from English to Arabic was accurate; (b) the survey was posted through a Survey Monkey website and a link for accessibility was created; and (c) all new SETs were sent the link through e-mail and WhatsApp. The e-mail contained the purpose of the survey, directions for participation, and the dates of the survey availability. The survey was available for two months so the new SETs could complete it at their convenience time. Follow-up e-mail messages were sent to all SETs who had not responded within one month of the specified due date.

The new SETs were informed that their participation is voluntary and anonymous, and they may withdraw from participation at any time. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, the SETs were given the opportunity to request survey results.

### 3. Results

The first section of the survey contained demographic information related to the SETs, including age and gender, and highest degree earned information. Over 69% of the new SETs was from 20 to 29 years old. The fifty-four respondents provided information about their degrees and their experience with students with disabilities as well. There was 59% of new SETs has Bachelor's, 37% has Master's degrees, and 3% had high diploma in special education. A total of 54 new SETs responded to the online survey. Resulting in a response rate of over 65%. There were inquiry stems and each stem was followed by response buttons titled, *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *undecided*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*.

The second section of the survey focused on the reasons that led SETs to leave the profession at a high rate of attrition. The inquiry stems that were included are as follows: (1) Necessary materials such as textbooks, supplies, and copy machines are available as needed. (2) General education teachers do not collaborate with me. (3) My principal does not give me enough support. (4) Paperwork takes too much time. (5) Having many students with disabilities in my room is a challenge to me. (6) If I could get high paying job outside the classroom, I would leave as soon as possible. (7) There is not enough time to complete IEPs and paperwork that needs to be done. (8) Finding curriculum materials and resources are a challenge for SETs. (9) Finding time to plan lessons with GET is a challenge for SETs. Response buttons- *strongly agree*, *agree*, *undecided*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*- followed each of these inquiry statements.

The new SETs in this study were asked to provide information on attrition reasons they might have experienced during their first five years of teaching. The majority of the new SETs rated shortage of classroom materials. There were 65% of the new SETs ranked collaboration with general education teacher as a significant concern during their first five years of teaching. Furthermore, there was 44.23% of the new SETs stated that they did not receive enough support from their principal during their first five years of teaching. There was 45% of new SETs found paperwork to be challenging for them. New SETs strongly stated that having many students with disabilities in their classroom was a challenging for them. There was 46.15% of new SETs indicated that they would leave the profession as soon as possible if they get high paying job outside the classroom. See Table 1 for more information.

**Table 1.** Reasons that lead SETs to leave the profession.

Statements	Strongly Agree Disagree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly
Necessary materials such as textbooks, supplies, and copy machines are available as needed.	28 (53.84%)	12 (23.76%)	3 (3.76%)	8 (15.38%)	1 (1.92%)
General education teachers do not collaborate with me.	34 (65.38%)	11 (21.15%)	2 (3.84%)	5 (9.61%)	0 (0.00%)
My principal does not give me enough support.	23 (44.23%)	8 (15.38%)	10 (19.23%)	7 (13.46%)	4 (7.69%)
Paperwork takes too much time.	23 (44.23%)	18 (34.61%)	3 (5.76%)	8 (15.38%)	1 (1.92%)
Having many students with disabilities in my room is a challenge to me.	27 (51.92%)	22 (42.30%)	2 (3.84%)	1 (1.92%)	0 (0.00%)
If I could get high paying job outside the classroom, I would leave as soon as possible.	24 (46.15%)	20 (38.46%)	4 (7.69%)	2 (3.84%)	2 (3.84%)
There is not enough time to complete IEPs and paperwork that needs to be done.	28 (53.38%)	10 (19.23%)	6 (11.53%)	6 (11.53%)	2 (3.84%)
Finding curriculum materials and resources is a challenge to me.	24 (46.15%)	20 (38.46%)	2 (3.84%)	2 (3.84%)	4 (7.69%)
Finding time to plan lessons with GET is A challenge for SETs.	22 (42.30%)	27 (51.92%)	2 (3.84%)	1 (1.92%)	0 (0.00%)

Section 3 of the survey focused on the mentoring program for new SETs. Mentoring program for new SETs in every district to help and guide new SETs work for special education. This section incorporated 8 inquiry statements: (1) I think the mentoring program had/has helped SETs to stay longer in the field. (2) I think SETs who had/have participated in the mentoring program will stay in the field of special education longer than SETs who do not participate in the mentoring program. (3) I believe that the mentoring program will benefit future SETs. (4) I believe that SETs who had/have participated in the mentoring program will not leave the profession at a high rate of attrition. (5) The mentoring program had/has prepared me to become an effective special education teacher. (6) The mentoring program had/has helped me to understand my roles and responsibilities as a special educator. (7) The mentoring program had/has increased my confidence in my first year of teaching. (8) I believe that the mentoring program will benefit future SETs.

The new SETs stated that mentoring program had helped them during their five years of teaching to remain longer in the field of special education. They also strongly stated that SETs who had participated in a mentoring program will remain in the field of special education longer than SETs who do not participate in a mentoring program. Moreover, the majority of the SETs indicated that mentoring program will benefit future SETs. More than half of new SETs stated that the mentoring program had helped them in their current role and prepared them to become an effective special educator. The same new SETs indicated that the mentoring program prepared them for working in special education. See Table 2 for specific response details.

**Table 2.** Mentoring program for new special education teachers

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I think the mentoring program had/has helped SETs to stay longer in the field.	15 (28.84%)	28 (53.84%)	6 (11.53%)	3 (5.76%)	0 (0.00%)
I think SETs who had/have participated in the mentoring program will stay in the field of special education longer than SETs who do not participate in the mentoring program.	27 (51.92%)	22 (42.30%)	2 (3.84%)	1 (1.92%)	0 (0.00)
I believe that the mentoring program will benefit future special education teachers.	21 (40.38%)	13 (25%)	10 (19.23%)	7 (13.46%)	1 (1.92%)
I believe that SETs who had/have participated in the mentoring program will NOT leave the profession at a high rate of attrition.	28 (53.84%)	15 (28.84%)	6 (11.53%)	3 (5.76%)	0 (0.00)
The mentoring program had/has prepared me to become an effective special educator.	14 (26.84%)	25 (48.07%)	10 (19.23%)	3 (5.76%)	0 (0.00%)
The mentoring program had/has helped me to understand my roles and responsibilities as a special educator.	16 (30.76%)	14 (26.92%)	8 (15.38%)	5 (9.61%)	3 (5.76%)
The mentoring program had/has increased my confidence in my first year of teaching.	24 (46.15%)	20 (38.46%)	4 (7.69%)	2 (3.84%)	2 (3.84%)

The mentoring program prepared me for working in special education.	36 (69.23%)	12 (23.07%)	0 (0.00)	4 (7.69%)	0 (0.00%)
The mentoring program provided me with new ideas/strategies in relation to my career development.	27 (51.92%)	22 (42.30%)	1 (1.92%)	2 (3.84%)	0 (0.00%)
	21 (40.38%)	13 (25%)	10 (19.23%)	7 (13.46%)	1 (1.92%)

#### 4. Discussion

This study was designed to investigate the impact of the mentoring program and to identify the factors that lead new SETs to leave the profession. However, providing and developing a mentoring program for new SETs is important not only for SETs but also for students with disabilities as well. The primary finding of this study emphasizes that SETs who participated in the mentoring program would stay in the field of special education longer than SETs who did not participate in a mentoring program. In addition, it was found that the new SETs who have participated in a mentoring program do not leave the field of special education at a high rate of attrition. The majority of new SETs agreed that mentoring program is beneficial for future SETs, and they were very satisfied with being participating in the mentoring programs.

Additional findings, as found in the factors section, indicated that there were multiple factors which affect SETs level of attrition such as lack of enough support from administrators, finding time to plan lessons with GET, finding time to do IEPs and paperwork, finding curriculum materials and resources, having many students with disabilities, and collaborating with the GET. These findings are important in increasing our knowledge of special education teachers' attrition.

Based on the findings of this study of new SETs attrition, and the impact of mentoring program, the following suggestions can be made to policy makers, new SETs, and administrators to provide beneficial mentorship programs: (1) Implement special education teacher preparations at universities to create courses focused on evolving special education policies, regulations, laws, and procedures that help SETs understanding their roles and responsibilities. (2) Support new SETs by giving them ample time to gain familiarity with the school and curriculum, and help them by setting up and organizing their classrooms, and planning for them during their first weeks. (3) Give extended level of support by mentorship programs for successful initiation to the teaching profession, especially during the first year of teaching. (4) Allow time for planning classroom observations, and give access to specific resources. (5) Provide professional support to develop new SETs knowledge and skills in different areas such as planning, assessment, programming, and reporting. (6) Provide training for mentor to successfully meet the complex and multiple demands of the role and responsibility of the role.

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