

Sustaining Excellence: Retaining Special Education Teachers through Culturally Responsive Collaboration

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Abstract

This study examines the factors influencing special education (SPED) teacher retention in multicultural and urban schools, with a particular focus on culturally responsive collaboration. Grounded in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, the research investigates both intrinsic motivators and structural supports that influence teacher satisfaction and longevity. Drawing on survey data from 72 educators—81 percent of whom had SPED experience—the study identifies passion for teaching, a sense of purpose, and collegial support as key drivers for persistence. The findings suggest that while intrinsic factors sustain educators, they must be reinforced by collaborative environments and culturally responsive school cultures. This paper presents implications for school leadership, policy reform, and professional development practices designed to enhance retention outcomes in special education.

Key Words

collaborative models, cultural responsiveness, equity, teacher retention

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Special education (SPED) teachers face ongoing challenges that contribute to high attrition rates, particularly in multicultural and urban school settings (Luekens et al., 2004; Ingersoll, 2001). These educators frequently work with vulnerable student populations while handling excessive workloads, compliance-heavy responsibilities, and limited administrative support. Combined with unrealistic expectations and insufficient access to culturally responsive resources, SPED teachers often experience professional burnout, low morale, and a reduced sense of efficacy (Cormier et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2020). The consequences of high turnover among

SPED teachers are especially harmful for students with disabilities, who thrive on instructional continuity and experienced educators who comprehend their unique needs. However, efforts to improve SPED teacher retention have frequently depended on narrow or individualized strategies, neglecting the larger organizational and cultural factors that influence teacher satisfaction and career longevity.

Although the current political climate and educational landscape is tenuous, students with disabilities must be served. Therefore, it is paramount that there are special education teachers equipped to serve them despite harsh realities that exist. Emerging

literature highlights the value of inclusive, collaborative school environments in supporting the resilience and retention of special education (SPED) teachers. In these environments, where teachers collaborate with paraprofessionals and general educators, interdisciplinary teams share their expertise, allocate responsibilities, and foster collaboration (Layden et al., 2023). Culturally responsive collaboration not only supports instruction but also affirms the identity and agency of special education teachers, particularly those working in diverse and high-need schools. Through a lens of sensemaking, this study explores the impact of culturally responsive collaboration on SPED teacher retention. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following questions:

1. What factors do special education teachers consider critical for their decision to stay in the profession?
2. How can culturally responsive and collaborative practices address retention challenges for SPED teachers in urban and multicultural settings?

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the present study is to ascertain the factors that motivate SPED teachers to remain in their roles in the teaching profession. This study utilizes sensemaking as a conceptual framework to better understand why these educators remain in public education and how they make sense of the circumstances that exist. Sensemaking refers to the process that individuals determine how to respond to and make sense of uncertainty (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) by focusing on the relationship between meaning and action (Weick et al., 2005). This study analyzes qualitative insights from veteran special education (SPED) teachers in multicultural urban districts to examine how collaborative school cultures influence their intention to remain in the profession. In doing so, it seeks to identify actionable strategies that promote sustainable, culturally affirming work environments for special education educators. The authors begin by providing a brief overview of the literature regarding school culture and working conditions, job stress and

resilience, and culturally responsive collaboration. A discussion of the theoretical framework will then follow.

Review of the Literature

Special education teachers work with one of our most vulnerable student populations. Among the essential skills for SPED teachers to effectively perform their roles are communication, collaboration, and flexibility (Fernandes et al., 2021). SPED teachers have specialized demands and responsibilities to their individual students and the general student population (Billingsley et al., 2020). To meet the challenging demands of their positions, SPED teachers rely on the knowledge they gained from their preparation programs, and their student teaching experiences, both of which have been shown to be connected to student outcomes and the SPED teachers' likelihood of remaining in the teacher workforce (Connelly & Graham, 2009; Johnson, 2010; Theobald et al., 2021). With the well-being and success of students receiving special education services as a priority, more attention must be paid to the erosion of the SPED teacher workforce (Kaff, 2004).

The ebb and flow of the SPED teacher workforce can lead to missed opportunities for students with disabilities receiving a free, appropriate public education (Peyton & Acosta, 2022). The shortage of SPED teachers and their attrition rates is a national concern. The shortage of special education teachers harms students, with students in rural areas, racially marginalized, and students in low-income areas most significantly affected (Gilmour et al., 2025; Mason-Williams, 2015). Special education is a high-demand position, and more strategies are needed to address retaining SPED teachers, rather than just recruiting them (Blad, 2024). Legislators and policy makers must be willing to invest resources to not only recruit, but to also retain SPED teachers by ensuring they are well-equipped to address the needs of their students and are provided with the environments that will allow them to thrive (Peyton & Acosta, 2022). Billingsley (2004) asserted that there are four factors important to retaining SPED teachers and cultivating their growth

and development: responsive induction programs, deliberate role design, favorable work conditions and supports, and professional development. Special education teachers are easier to attract and recruit in supportive communities. However, among the reasons for SPED teachers leaving cited in the research are unsupportive organizational contexts (Grooms et al., 2021), working conditions (Kraft et al., 2020), and job stress and burnout (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). The next section will discuss school climate and working conditions, job stress and resilience, and culturally responsive collaboration.

School Culture

Employees are less likely to leave a job when there is a healthy, strong workplace culture (Ingersoll & May, 2011; Sull et al., 2022). A strong workplace culture is one characterized by professional cooperation between teachers and administrators and collaboration between teachers (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Stearns et al., 2015). Central to a strong work culture are trust and shared values (Stearns et al., 2015). In their analysis of the job satisfaction of a national sample of kindergarten teachers using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Stearns and colleagues (2015) concluded that a strong professional community with shared values, school pride, and mutual respect as well as a norm of collaboration were predictors of job satisfaction among kindergarten teachers. Thus, it is important to create cultures that are positive and supportive.

Closely related to school culture are the working conditions that teachers are expected to function within that affect their satisfaction, morale, and overall effectiveness (Billingsley et al., 2020). Job satisfaction contributes to teacher well-being and teacher retention (Toropova et al., 2021). In their study employing data from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science data for 2015, Toropova and colleagues (2021) found that there was a substantial association between teacher working conditions and teacher satisfaction. Billingsley and colleagues (2020) in their content analysis of literature related to teacher

working conditions indicated that working conditions are the roles and responsibilities, supports (administrative and collegial), and demands placed on teachers in their daily work at schools. Further, they suggested that working conditions may be a powerful lever to be used in improving teacher effectiveness and increase the likelihood that teachers will continue teaching when they experience more positive working workplace culture (Sull et al., 2022).

Job Stress and Resilience

Teachers have been shown to be at high risk of developing anxiety and burnout due to the stress related to the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016; Vargas Rubliar & Oros, 2021). Lambert and colleagues (2019) in their study of kindergarten teachers in the United States found that teachers were at a higher risk of stress when they perceived that the demands of their job (behavioral problems, student absences, administrative demands, and lack of materials) were greater than the resources available for them to do their job. Burnout is greater for teachers who have higher loads of stress and levels of discomfort (Vargas Rubliar & Oros, 2021). Teachers who feel pressured by time are also likely to experience burnout as this dimension of burnout affects their motivation and well-being most strongly (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). Burnout has been recognized as an outcome of stress and an illness from which individuals must recover (Lee & Riach, 2023; Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Recognizing burnout and providing opportunities for teachers to recover is related to teacher job satisfaction and their motivation to stay in the teacher profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). According to a report of the Rand Corporation based on findings from the State of the U.S. Teacher Survey, job-related stress and its long-term effects adversely affect teacher retention. The report suggests that to avert teacher shortages, policymakers must address the job-related stressors experienced by teachers (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

According to Masten (2014), resilience refers to an individual's capacity to successfully adapt to disruptions and disturbances in their environments that threaten their viability, development, and system

functioning. According to Beltman and colleagues (2011), resilience is the outcome of the relationship between individual risk and protective factors, with self-efficacy and altruism being the key protective factors. The authors assert that stakeholders must reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors for teachers to persist in the face of challenges and for them to thrive.

Respect and support have been shown to be sources of resiliency among SPED teachers (Belknap & Taymans, 2015). In their study of novice SPED teachers, Belknap and Taymans (2015) found that SPED teachers who struggled with finding their own identity in co-teaching classrooms were at risk of leaving the profession. Teachers expressed that lack of collegial support in addition to the demands of balancing student needs with content standards increased the likelihood that they would not remain in the classroom.

Culturally Responsive Collaboration

Culturally responsive teaching practices produce positive outcomes, increase student engagement, and help teachers better understand the relationship between teacher questioning patterns and student interaction (Brown & Crippen, 2016; Hastings, 2023; Nagourney, 2023). Culturally responsive collaboration is about learning from and relating to others who may be different from or similar to themselves. According to Greene (2011), culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities have more challenges to overcome than their White peers. The author asserts that not only must special educators be equipped to collaborate with families in culturally responsive ways, but they must also be able to communicate and collaborate with their colleagues for the most optimal outcomes for their students. Paju and colleagues (2021) posit that special educators must be reflective and willing to confront their implicit biases that may impact collaboration. To create inclusive environments, special educators must be willing to collaborate with their colleagues who may be unfamiliar with inclusive practices.

Meaningful engagement and collaboration are important for helping teachers learn strategies to

address classroom realities and be responsive to diverse student needs (Ramsay-Jordan, 2022). Barrio (2020) suggests that culturally responsive collaboration between general education and special education teachers given the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students referred to special education. The dearth of available research suggests that additional research is needed to address the impact of culturally responsive collaboration and SPED teacher retention.

Theoretical Framework

Sensemaking is applied to the analysis of the data in this study to gain a better understanding of how SPED teachers make sense of their teaching experiences. The sensemaking framework is appropriate when exploring why employees leave or stay at organizations. The process of understanding involves the core elements of identity and well-being, namely, purpose, trajectory, relatedness, expression, acceptance, and differentiation (Rothausen et al., 2017). Sensemaking emphasizes the intentional agency of the sense maker—in this study, SPED teachers, so that we are able to analyze the experiences of each participant (Degn, 2015; Samuels et al., 2021). Through a lens of sensemaking researchers are able to analyze teachers' language and talk, as well as examine and analyze factors affecting teachers' retention.

To better understand what sustains SPED teachers in their roles, this study draws on Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Alshmemri et al., 2017; Herzberg et al., 1959). The theory distinguishes between hygiene factors (such as administrative policies, relationships, and working conditions) and motivators (such as recognition, professional growth, and meaningful work), which contribute to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Applying this lens, the study examines how collaboration serves as both a hygiene factor, through improved support structures, and a motivator that enhances teachers' sense of purpose and fulfillment.

In 1959, Herzberg and colleagues sought to answer the question, "What do workers want from their job?" Through their analysis and subsequent research,

the Herzberg two-factor theory, also known as the dual-factor theory, was developed. This theory addresses both intrinsic (motivation) and extrinsic (hygiene) factors that influence an individual's job satisfaction. According to Peramatzis and Galanakis (2022), the most important aspect of the theory is that intrinsic value and satisfaction are derived from the job itself, rather than from the environment. Researchers have applied Herzberg's Two-Factor theory when analyzing teachers' job satisfaction (Miah & Hasan, 2022; Zhi et al., 2024). Researchers who studied the factors increasing job satisfaction found that hygiene factors, including job security, salary, fringe benefits, and working conditions, were most responsible for causing job dissatisfaction (Miah & Hasan, 2022; Zhi et al., 2024).

Methodology

This qualitative study utilizes a descriptive-interpretive approach (Sandelowski, 2000) to explore the intersections between educator motivation, collaborative culture, and culturally responsive strategies for special education (SPED) teachers. Although the survey employed closed-ended items, the interpretive analysis focused on identifying thematic patterns across responses, allowing for qualitative insights into educator motivations and perceptions.

Survey Context and Scope

Data for this study were drawn from the *Resilient Educators' Voices Survey*, a broader instrument designed to investigate why educators remain in the classroom and what additional support they may need. While the full survey included open-ended questions related to mental health and absenteeism policies, this manuscript focuses specifically on the subset of responses from participants with special education experiences. The analysis centers on closed-ended items most relevant to SPED teacher retention, including years of experience and primary motivations for staying in the profession.

Research Design and Collection

The survey for this IRB approved study was developed and administered by one of the researchers using Microsoft Forms. It was distributed via email, professional networks, and social media platforms, employing snowball sampling aimed to reach a diverse pool of educators (Parker et al., 2019). A total of 72 participants completed the survey, of whom 58 (81%) reported having worked as special education teachers at some point in their careers. The instrument included a combination of Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions that explored educators' motivations for remaining in the profession, their perceptions of support, and their professional experiences. For this study, the analysis focuses on two key items most relevant to the special education teacher retention focus: (1) Educator experience by years and (2) primary reasons for remaining in the profession.

Data Analysis

Given the lack of SPED-specific open-ended questions, the study adopts a thematic synthesis approach to analyze frequency patterns and co-occurrence of response patterns. These patterns were interpreted in conjunction with relevant literature on special education, teacher retention, culturally responsive pedagogy, and collaborative school practices. This method enabled the integration of empirical data with theoretical and practitioner-informed models, resulting in a practice-informed, evidence-based narrative on SPED teachers' well-being and sustainability (Andrade & Rivers, 2019; Hagley, 2025; Laravie, 2023; Walter et al., 2023).

Research Questions

This study is guided by two central research questions:

1. What factors do special education teachers consider critical for their decision to stay in the profession?
2. How can culturally responsive and collaborative practices address retention challenges for SPED teachers in urban and multicultural settings?

By aligning practitioner-reported experiences with research-based frameworks, this methodology aims to create a foundation for developing culturally responsive collaboration models that can be implemented in schools and districts seeking to retain special education teachers.

Findings

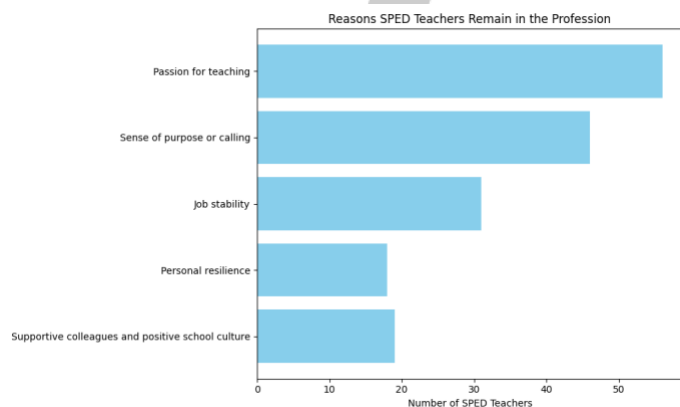
When making sense of why individuals perform or act in a certain way, you must consider their interactions with others, their views, and how they assign meaning to their experiences (Rothausen et al., 2017). Survey responses indicated that the majority of SPED teachers chose to remain in the profession due to intrinsic motivators (Herzberg et al., 1959). The most frequently cited reasons were:

- Passion for teaching (n = 56)
- Sense of purpose or calling (n = 46)
- Job stability (n = 31)
- Supportive colleagues and a positive school culture (n = 19)
- Personal resilience and the ability to overcome challenges (n = 18)

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of key motivators reported by SPED teachers who chose to remain in the profession.

Figure 1

Distribution of Key Motivators Among SPED Teachers



These findings underscore the importance of both internal motivators and relational supports in

fostering educator resilience and long-term retention. The results align with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, reflecting both motivational factors, such as personal growth and purpose, and hygiene factors, including collegiality and job security, which influence overall job satisfaction and retention outcomes.

Recommendations

The findings emphasize that special education (SPED) teacher retention is shaped by a combination of internal motivators, such as passion, purpose, and resilience, as well as external supports, including collegial relationships and school culture. These results reinforce Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, suggesting that both motivational and hygiene factors must be addressed to foster long-term commitment among SPED educators (Zhang et al., 2020). While intrinsic drivers like a sense of calling are powerful, they are not self-sustaining. Without intentional support structures, even the most resilient educators may face burnout. Therefore, retention efforts must move beyond individual-level interventions and toward systemic, culturally responsive strategies that nurture both personal and professional well-being. To create lasting change, schools and districts should consider the five actionable recommendations listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Recommendations for Supporting SPED Teacher Retention

Recommendation	Question
Embed Culturally Responsive Collaboration into Professional Development.	Offer ongoing training that equips educators to engage in culturally responsive practices and collaborative problem-solving. This builds shared understanding and strengthens inclusive school cultures.
Establish Peer Mentorship Programs for SPED teachers	Pair early-career SPED teachers with experienced mentors to provide emotional support, instructional guidance, and a sense of community.

Table 1 (continued)

Recommendation	Question
Promote Teacher Leadership Pathways in Special Education	Create opportunities for SPED teachers to lead initiatives, contribute to policy decisions, and shape school culture. This affirms their expertise and increases job satisfaction.
Integrate Retention Strategies into School and District Policy	Institutionalize retention efforts by embedding them into hiring practices, evaluation systems, and strategic planning. This ensures sustainability and accountability.
Foster Supportive School Climates through Administrative Engagement	Encourage school leaders to actively support SPED teachers by recognizing their contributions, reducing unnecessary compliance burdens, and facilitating collaboration across departments.

These recommendations are grounded in both empirical data and practitioner experience, offering a practice-informed framework for improving SPED teacher retention, particularly in urban and multicultural settings where the need is most urgent (Vicary et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the factors that influence special education (SPED) teacher retention, with a focus on culturally responsive collaboration and educator motivation. The findings reveal that retention is not solely a matter of external support or policy; it is deeply rooted in educators' personal commitment, sense of purpose, and resilience. However, these intrinsic motivators cannot thrive in isolation. They must be nurtured within school cultures that intentionally promote collaboration, respect educators' identities, and prioritize mental wellness (Kidger et al, 2021). By interpreting survey data through a qualitative lens and aligning it with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, this study highlights the dual importance of motivational and hygiene factors in sustaining SPED

teachers (Fuller, 2025). It also underscores the need for system-level interventions that go beyond surface-level solutions. Retention strategies must be embedded into professional development, leadership pathways, and institutional policies that reflect equity-centered, culturally responsive values.

Ultimately, retaining SPED teachers is not just a staffing issue, it is a matter of educational justice. When educators are supported holistically, they are better equipped to serve students with disabilities in meaningful, consistent, and empowering ways (Scott et al., 2022). The recommendations offered here provide a foundation for schools and districts to build inclusive environments where both teachers and students can thrive. Future research should continue to explore the lived experiences of SPED educators, particularly in diverse and under-resourced settings. Expanding the scope to include longitudinal data and open-ended narratives will provide deeper insights and understanding to expand the practical applications of this work. As educational systems evolve, so too must our approaches to supporting the professionals who make inclusive education possible.

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