Issues in Special Education Teacher Recruitment, Retention, and Professional Development: Considerations in Supporting Rural Teachers

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Abstract

This study sought to obtain a current picture of special education teacher recruitment and retention in rural districts and to understand the professional development needs of rural special educators. Surveys, administered through telephone interviews with a national sample of special education administrators and teachers, confirmed the difficulties in hiring appropriately qualified teachers. Additional demands of the position may place teachers at risk for attrition. The authors identified important areas of professional development to support rural teachers in their positions: (a) working with paraprofessionals and parents, (b) low-incidence disabilities, (c) emotional and behavior disorders, (d) classroom management, (e) skills in collaboration and inclusive practices, and (f) curriculum content.

Keywords: rural, special education, retention, professional development, training

Historically, administrators in rural districts (43% of the nation’s school districts) have struggled with the supply of special education personnel (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Many rural administrators (i.e., 27%) maintain they either have difficulty finding special educators to fill vacancies or are unable to fill positions at all (Provasnik et al., 2007). The shortage of qualified teachers can result in practices that perpetuate further attrition. Less qualified teachers may be hired for positions because teachers are in short supply in rural areas; yet, teachers with insufficient certification and training report less commitment to their positions (Miller, Brownell, & Smith 1999; Stempfen & Loeb, 2002). In addition, the characteristics of special education positions in rural areas may contribute to teacher shortages. The lower incidence of disability categories in remote and vast rural districts may mean that teachers face a greater diversity of abilities and disabilities on their caseload. Teachers may be providing services to students outside of their areas of training and certification (Schwartzbeck, Prince, Redfield, Morris, & Hammer, 2003). To support special educators who may feel they are teaching beyond the scope of their training and expertise, further professional development is one avenue commonly used by administrators to provide teachers with additional knowledge and skills that promote teacher confidence and commitment to their positions (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2002; Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2005; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). The current study sought to address several issues related to teacher attrition and explore opportunities to support rural special educators with relevant professional development.

In the United States, there are shortages of special education teachers in almost every disability category (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). In especially short supply in rural areas are teachers certified in severe disabilities, early intervention, and low-incidence disabilities, such as visual or hearing impairments or significant cognitive impairment (Ludlow, Conner, & Schechter, 2005). The shortage of qualified special educators and the difficulties in recruiting qualified...
teachers are significant challenges in rural districts (Purcell, East, & Rude, 2005).

As a result of teacher shortages and a smaller professional pool from which to draw, rural administrators may hire teachers who are inadequately experienced or inappropriately certified in order to fill special education positions. Hiring teachers with inadequate training to fill vacancies, however, may simply exacerbate shortages, as insufficient certification is one factor that contributes to increased teacher attrition. Research with both regular and special educators has shown that less experienced, inadequate, or uncertified teachers express higher levels of dissatisfaction (Miller et al., 1999; Stempien & Loeb, 2002). Researchers have hypothesized that special educators with inadequate training and experience may feel overwhelmed and less effective and subsequently report less commitment to their positions.

In addition to teacher shortages, there are several characteristics to the special education position, unique to teaching in rural areas, which may contribute to teacher attrition. The lower incidence of special needs populations in rural areas may require special educators to provide instruction to students with differing abilities in kindergarten through 12th grade across a variety of curriculum areas (Schwartzbeck et al., 2003). Limited personnel and/or operating budgets can limit placement options, requiring teachers to provide services to a heterogeneous group of students in the same classroom (Schwartzbeck et al., 2003) or provide services to students in the general education classroom. For some rural districts, it is more feasible to fund the provision of services in the general education classroom rather than fund separate settings and additional staff (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007).

Providing services to students with a diverse range of abilities in a variety of settings may stretch the traditional teacher preparation that special educators receive. The expanded role of special educators in rural areas may mean that some teachers are providing services to students outside their training and expertise and require additional support and training to feel effective and committed in their positions. One possible solution, therefore, to address the disparities influencing the retention of 887 special educators, found that training that prepared teachers to collaborate with general educators in inclusive settings was important to the special educators’ job satisfaction. Research suggests that professional development can support teachers by providing them with opportunities to grow as professionals and, thus, have an indirect effect on their intent to stay (Billingsley, 2004). Further training, therefore, should be one part of any comprehensive plan to reduce teacher attrition in rural areas.

Since there is a role for professional development to play in the retention of rural special educators, it is important to understand the specific areas teachers are asked to address that are outside their areas of expertise and certification. Further, it would be useful to know what professional development teachers find most helpful and the areas in which they desire further training. The purpose of the present study, therefore, was to obtain a current picture of special education recruitment and retention difficulties in rural areas and, for the first time on a national scale, delineate the professional development needs of rural special educators. This information is critical to stakeholders interested in supporting teachers to remain in their positions in rural schools.

The following research questions were developed to address the purpose of the study: (a) What is the current picture of rural special education teacher recruitment and retention? (b) Do rural special educators report they provide services to students with disabilities that are outside the scope of their certification? (c) What professional development provided by the district do teachers report as helpful to them? and (d) What additional topics would teachers find helpful, if they were provided?

Method

Telephone interviews were utilized during the study to solicit information from rural special education administrators and teachers. The development of the survey used by the interviewers and survey content are outlined below. These methods are similar to those used in previous retention research (e.g., Westling & Whitten, 1996; Whitaker, 2000). Procedures for interviewer training, fidelity of survey administration, response recording, sample selection, and data analysis also are described. The researchers employed such methods to capture a representational picture of the questions under investigation and to ensure the relevance of the survey to the concerns of rural administrators and teachers.

Survey Development

The researchers developed both administrator and teacher surveys by incorporating the results from a focus group, a literature review of the research on rural
special education teacher retention, and the comments from a review of the instrument by a panel of national experts. In addition, they piloted the teacher survey with a representative group of rural special educators.

The researchers asked both administrators and teachers for information regarding the recruitment and retention of special education teachers, the special education services in their schools or districts, and professional development. Table 1 provides sample questions from both surveys. Survey items had either a multiple option or an open-ended format. The majority of the questions were a multiple option format, which required the respondents to select from a list of possible options (i.e., forced choice) or select as many options as were appropriate. For example, teachers selected from a list of 14 possible professional development topics (e.g., technology, positive behavior support) and indicated if that training had been available in their districts in the past 3 years. Teachers were able to volunteer topics that were not on the list. For these types of open-ended items, interviewers recorded the responses by typing them into a database.

Table 1.

Sample Survey Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How difficult is it for you to fill special education vacancies in your district?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you currently having to staff special education positions with under qualified teachers?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Retention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which of the following responses best captures the two or three main reasons why special education teachers typically leave your district?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What type of certifications do you currently hold?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you feel you are asked to provide services to students outside your areas of certification? If so which areas?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Professional Development</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often would you say special education teachers in your district participate in professional development and/or service-related training opportunities?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any of the previously mentioned types of professional development that were not available that you feel would be helpful if they were available?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, what professional development/training was MOST helpful to you professionally in your role as a special educator over the past three years?

Survey Administration

Interviewers administered the surveys through telephone interviews between April and December of 2009. All interviewers participated in 2 days of training to ensure the surveys were administered with consistency as designed. The researchers designed the surveys to take 30 to 60 min to administer. They trained interviewers to verify responses for open-ended questions by reading the recorded answer back to the participants and making changes as necessary. The researchers conducted observations with all interviewers during training, and at 1, 2, and 5 months following the start of the study. They found an average accuracy level of 98% for survey administration and response recording (i.e., number of survey sentences correctly read from the survey or recorded on survey transcripts divided by the
number correct plus the number incorrect). In addition, project directors held weekly meetings with the research team to discuss individual interpretation of responses and ensure consistency across interviewers.

Participants

Administrators and special education teachers who were employed in rural districts over the span of 2 school years, from 2008 through 2010, participated in the study. To identify participants, the researchers identified all regular public school districts listed in the 2005-06 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; Version 1a: NCES, 2006b). They identified rural districts as (a) districts eligible for the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) by the Department of Education; (b) districts identified as rural by NCES with a metro-centric locale code of 7 or 8; or (c) districts identified by NCES as rural by an urban-centric code indicating rural fringe, distant, or remote (NCES, 2006a). The result was a list of 8,646 rural districts. A computer selected a random sample of 10%, which yielded a pool of 864 rural districts.

The researchers sent letters to all administrators responsible for special education services in each rural district introducing the aims of the research project and soliciting their participation. Follow-up phone calls yielded 373 administrators in 43 states that agreed to participate in the research for a participation rate of 76% (i.e., 373/494; calculated as the number of administrators who participated divided by the number identified minus the number who were not contacted directly by telephone (i.e., 366 administrators) and the four ineligible candidates (i.e., not special education administrators). The researchers compensated administrators with 20 dollars for their participation.

As interviewers would be administering the survey to individual teachers by telephone interview, researchers randomly selected 55 districts from the identified districts in order to create a sample size of 200 to 500 teachers. Researchers then identified all the special educators in each district to create a district-wide sample, yielding a pool of 522 candidates. The researchers mailed a letter of introduction to each teacher explaining the aims of the study. The teachers were then contacted by telephone to solicit their voluntary participation in the study. In districts with more than 10 special education teachers, the researchers contacted teachers until 10 teachers had been interviewed to prevent larger districts from being overrepresented in the overall sample. One hundred and fifty nine teachers were found ineligible for participation (i.e., not special educators or above the cap of 10 teachers). A total of 203 special educators from 33 states volunteered to participate in the study for a participation rate of 84% (i.e., 203/243; calculated as the number of teachers who participated divided by the number identified minus the number who were not contacted directly by telephone [i.e., 120 teachers] and those who were deemed ineligible). The researchers compensated teachers with 20 dollars for their participation.

The teachers in this sample had a variety of educational backgrounds, experience, and credentials. The majority of teachers (83%) had obtained their certification from a traditional teacher-training program, and 57% had graduated from programs that required at least 25 credits in special education. On average, the special educators in these rural districts had been working in their positions for 8 years and had been teaching in the field of special education for 13 years. Sixty percent of all the teachers reported that they held elementary special education certification, while 62% held middle school special education certification, and 50% were certified in high school special education. Some teachers were certified to teach more than one level. Twenty-four percent of the teachers held an unspecified special education certification (e.g., general special education, mild disabilities K-12). The 203 teachers held general education certifications: 50% in elementary, 39% in middle school, and 8% in high school. Most teachers (97%) taught full-time, working primarily in either a resource room or an inclusionary setting (75%); whereas, 25% provided services in a self-contained setting.

Data Analysis

The researchers recorded participant responses in a computer database to ensure the accuracy of data tabulation. The principal investigator and an independent rater grouped open-ended responses into categories (e.g., areas of certification). Inter-rater reliability was calculated at 95%. Descriptive statistics were compiled based on the frequency and variety of administrator and teacher responses.

Results

In response to the research questions under investigation, descriptive statistics are presented to illuminate several issues related to the recruitment and retention of special educators in rural areas. The professional development needs of special educators in rural areas are highlighted through the reported teacher caseload responsibilities, the areas of disability outside the scope of certification, and the topics of interest for professional training.

Difficulties in Recruitment in Rural Districts

Over half the administrators (51%) reported moderate to extreme difficulties filling special education teacher vacancies in their rural districts. Administrators identified emotional and behavior
disorders, autism, severe or multiple disabilities, hearing, vision, and sensory impairment as the disability categories that were the most difficult to serve. Seven percent of districts were unable to fill special education positions, and 13% hired teachers on provisionary or beginning licenses. More than 50% of the district administrators filling positions said they hired at least one teacher whose qualifications did not meet the No Child Left Behind standard for highly qualified teachers. In fact, 56 teachers, or 28% of the rural special educators interviewed, stated that they did not hold their state's highest level of certification.

**Difficulties in Retention in Rural Districts**

When administrators were asked to name the primary reasons special educators left their district, 28% stated that they did not have a problem with teacher retention. However, 72% of the administrators reported difficulty with teacher retention and specified the reasons for attrition. Administrators acknowledged that teachers often left to retire (21%) and for personal reasons (37%). Those factors aside, administrators cited special education paperwork (8%) and better salaries and benefits in competing districts (13%) as the main reasons for teacher attrition. Similarly, the four factors most frequently selected by the administrators as having a large to moderate effect on retaining special education teachers were: (a) competition from other districts, (b) salary, (c) geographic isolation, and (d) benefit packages.

When speaking directly with the teachers, 42% reported they would be leaving special education in their rural schools in the next 5 years. Some of these teachers were planning to retire (13%) or work in leadership positions (4%). The rest (25%) were leaving for positions in other districts or staying in their schools to teach in general education or related positions (e.g., reading specialist). Leavers gave a variety reasons: (a) retirement or a desire to scale back their responsibilities (27%), (b) teacher burnout, stress, the pressure of the job, and/or the lack of support (24%); and (c) a desire to change schools or age groups (13%). Less than six percent of the teachers mentioned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>% of teachers certified in specific area n = 203</th>
<th>% of teachers serving disability/area n = 203</th>
<th>% of teachers who named area as outside their certification n = 67</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Services performed by a related service provider</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>41 SL&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>22&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content subjects</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional and behavior disorders</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive disabilities</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe disabilities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health, physical, medical&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-risk or unidentified students</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning disabilities</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision impairment / Hearing impairment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other health impairment</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Dash (—) denotes area not specified by teachers.

<sup>a</sup> SL = speech and language services.

<sup>b</sup> Related service provider percentages for areas outside certification: 9% speech and language, 6% mental health, 1% English as a second language, 4% occupational or physical therapy.

<sup>c</sup> e.g., orthopedic impairment.
issues cited by the administrators: (a) salary, (b) benefits, (c) remote locations, and (d) paperwork.

Areas Beyond the Scope of Certification

Table 2 specifies areas of teachers' certification and the categories of the disabilities of the students on teachers' caseloads. As can be seen, a few teachers held certifications in specific disability areas and curriculum content. The majority of teachers provided services to students with high-incidence disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities); however, many teachers provided services to students with low-incidence disabilities, such as severe disabilities (36%), health related disabilities (23%), and vision and hearing impairments (19%). More than half of the teachers provided services to students with autism (62%) and cognitive disabilities (59%). One teacher remarked, “The diversity in the classroom [is a challenge], I have LD, BD, MR, and autistic with one assistant. It is very difficult.”

Table 2 also summarizes the areas of disability teachers were asked to provide services in but felt were beyond the scope of their certifications. The results of this open-ended question reveal that one-third (33%) of the teachers reported providing services to students that stretched their training. Teachers named several specific areas of disability including autism, emotional and behavior disorders, and cognitive disabilities. Approximately one-fourth (28%) of the teachers identified aspects of providing services in the general education curriculum as beyond the scope of their certifications (i.e., content areas and working with at-risk students).

Helpful Professional Development

Administrators reported that their districts supported the professional development of their teachers by offering trainings frequently on a variety of topics; 70% held training once a month. The teachers identified the topics they found to be the most helpful, and these results are summarized in Table 3. The most frequently selected topics were: (a) special education processes (e.g., writing IEPs), (b) technology, (c) general curriculum content, and (d) further training in specific disability categories. Twenty-six percent of the teachers specified training related to their roles in the general education classroom as most helpful to them professionally (i.e., content-specific training, grade-level or school-level collaboration, inclusion).

Professional Development Needs

The types of training teachers mentioned would be helpful, if provided, also are summarized in Table 3. The four topics in highest demand were: (a) working with paraprofessionals, (b) working with parents, (c) training in a specific disability category, and (d) including students with disabilities in the general education curriculum. Twenty percent of the teachers desired additional training to support positive student behavior. The majority of teachers (76%) appreciated trainings held locally or in their district. Teachers reported that traveling distances (33%), arranging for childcare (13%), and finding coverage for their classes (32%) created significant barriers to participating in professional development not held in their rural area.

Discussion

A better understanding of the attrition of personnel and the difficulties related to the shortage of special education teachers in rural areas is shaped by the findings in this study in several ways. A current picture of the difficulties administrators have recruiting special education teachers in rural districts was underscored by administrators who reported a moderate to extreme difficulty in hiring and retaining teachers, particularly those certified in areas of low-incidence disabilities. One contributing factor to these recruitment difficulties appeared to be the teacher shortage in special education. Many administrators stated they hired teachers who were not fully qualified. The teachers themselves supported these findings: over one-fourth self-reported they did not hold their state’s highest level of certification. Therefore, the trend of hiring of special education teachers with inadequate or inappropriate training appears to be one of the consequences of teacher shortages and recruitment difficulties in rural districts.

The diverse nature of the student population in rural schools created an additional challenge for teachers in rural districts. This diversity was represented by the percentages of teachers serving the variety of disability categories seen in Table 2. One interesting finding is that one-third of the special educators interviewed remarked that they provided services to students in areas they did not feel qualified or adequately prepared to teach. These areas are the same areas in which administrators reported difficulties finding certified teachers (i.e., emotional and behavior disorders, autism, severe or multiple disabilities, hearing, vision, and sensory impairment). Thus, the administrative difficulty in obtaining appropriately qualified teachers may be related to the difficulty the teachers expressed in meeting the needs of students on their caseloads. Insufficiently certified teachers feel less effective in their roles and demonstrate less commitment (Miller et al., 1999; Stempien & Loeb, 2002). Therefore, teacher shortages and recruitment difficulties may contribute to hiring practices that, in fact, intensify the problem of maintaining a qualified workforce in rural areas.

As confirmation of the difficulty administrators reported in retaining rural special education teachers, over one-third of the teachers in this study reported they would be leaving their special education positions. One-
Table 3.

Professional Development Selected by Teachers as Helpful and Desired

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Most Helpful</th>
<th>Desired</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working with paraprofessionals</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with parents</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education processes</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content-specific</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific disability category</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of students in the general education curriculum</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive behavior support</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical management/behavior</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade-level or school-level collaboration</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management/ discipline</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative assessment</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Asterisk (*) denotes < 2% of teachers.

fourth of the teachers indicated they would be leaving to teach in other districts or general education positions in their rural schools. It should be emphasized that researchers solicited the perceptions of teachers rather than analyzing actual teacher exit data. This fact represents a limitation of the reported results. Nonetheless, the findings create a worrisome dilemma for rural administrators and other stakeholders interested in retaining qualified personnel in special education. One possible retention strategy is providing teachers with further training to support them with the responsibilities and challenges of their positions. Fortunately, the results reported here provide specific information on just what those professional development topics should be.

Needed Professional Development for Rural Special Educators

Through information about the characteristics of their workload and the diverse nature of the students they served, the surveyed rural special educators indicated several areas of focus for future professional development by designating (a) areas outside their certification, (b) professional development they found helpful, and (c) training they desired. Some topics were related to familiar aspects of a special educator’s position (i.e., working with parents and paraprofessionals). However, teachers also outlined other topics that can inform administrators when designing in-service training opportunities. At the top of the teachers’ lists were low-incidence disabilities, issues related to student behavior, and general education responsibilities.

Teachers named several types of low-incidence disabilities as areas in which they were asked to provide services, but that were outside their typical certification: (a) autism, (b) cognitive impairment, (c) hearing and vision impairment, (d) emotional and behavior disorders, and (e) severe disabilities. These findings were supported by the responses teachers gave when asked about trainings they would like their districts to provide. Many teachers desired further
training in specific disability categories and support with student behavior.

Since the majority of teachers had been through traditional training programs and had several years of experience working in special education, it seems reasonable to attribute the teachers' desire for additional training in specific areas of disability and behavior issues to the wider scope of disabilities encountered in rural areas and the general nature of their special education training. In other words, it appears that the variety of disability and ability levels of students in rural areas presents a challenge for special educators and that they desire support through further training in specific areas of disability as a result.

Teachers requested more training to assist them with their roles in the general education classroom. One-fourth of the teachers interviewed requested further professional development to improve (a) their understanding of curriculum content, (b) their ability to include students in the general education classroom, and (c) their ability to collaborate with general education teachers. Moreover, 21% of the teachers, who felt that they were teaching outside their area of certification, named general education content areas as a matter of concern.

**Implications and Future Directions**

Clearly, these results can be interpreted as a mandate from rural special education teachers and provide rural administrators and educational leaders with a judicious course of action when supporting rural teachers in special education positions. This study dictates several areas of focus for pre-service and local in-service training: (a) the coordination of services with paraprofessionals and parents; (b) low-incidence disabilities; (c) emotional and behavior disorders; (d) classroom management; (e) skills in collaboration and inclusive practices; and (f) curriculum content. Such training is most effective if facilitated by learning in a community (i.e., teachers problem-solve situations from their practice and learn from one another) to promote teacher understanding and the transfer of knowledge to practices in the classroom (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Teacher preparation programs, specifically those which focus on preparing teachers to work in rural areas, would be prudent to offer specific pedagogy in collaboration and educating students with disabilities as a team with general educators and related service providers. Future research may want to specifically investigate the relationship between this type of training and the commitment of special educators in rural schools.

**Conclusion**

The survey of rural special education administrators and, for the first time on a national scale, rural special education teachers underscores several important issues related to teacher retention. This sample of administrators and teachers reports continuing and critical trends in special education teacher shortages and the increased attrition of special education personnel in rural areas. Both sources confirm that the difficulty with recruiting new teachers and the demands of the position in rural areas place teachers at a greater risk for attrition. The results of this study prescribe specific areas of professional development that would provide teachers with the necessary and desired training to assist them with the responsibilities of their positions. Such professional support may increase teacher confidence when providing services to students with disabilities in rural areas and support teachers in remaining in their positions in rural schools.
References


