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A STUDY TO DETERMINE THE BASIS OF ATTRITION AMONG
LEARNING DISABILITIES TEACHER/CONSULTANTS

by
Julie M. Mason

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
Spring 2000

Approved by _____

Date Approved May 8, 2000

Abstract

Julie M. Mason

A study to determine the basis of attrition among
learning disabilities teacher/consultants

Spring 2000

Dr. Stanley Urban

Master of Arts in Learning Disabilities

Fourteen certified learning disabilities teacher/consultants (LDT/C's) who are not working in that position were identified by the child study team director from their district. All fourteen responded to a survey that asked them to characterize their feelings about certain statements that pertained to the LDT/C position. A Likert rating scale was used to show how strongly the respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement.

Results were analyzed and it was revealed that five out of the fourteen who responded never worked as an LDT/C. Upon further review, it was also discovered that not one statement was answered the same by all those who responded. This indicates that there is not one specific area in the position of LDT/C that causes people to return to the classroom. The most significant finding revealed in the comments made by many who were surveyed was that most left the position to return to teaching where they could have more daily interaction with students.

Mini-Abstract

Julie M. Mason

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Dr. Stanley Urban

Master of Arts Learning Disabilities

Fourteen certified learning disabilities teacher/consultants (LDT/C's) who are not working in that position responded to a survey that asked them to characterize their feelings about certain statements that pertained to the LDT/C position. Results revealed the major reason people either left the position or never entered into the field was that they wanted to have more contact with students.

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Table of Contents

	Page
I. Abstract	
II. Mini-abstract	
III. Acknowledgements	
IV. Chapter 1 – Statement of the Problem	1
Background	1
Research Question	2
Purpose of Study	2
Value of Study	2
V. Chapter II – Review of the Literature	3
Summary	8
VI. Chapter III – Methodology and Procedures	10
Population	10
Instrumentation	10
Collection of Data	10
VII. Chapter IV – Analysis and Interpretation of Data	12
Results	12
Representative Narrative Comments	14
Summary	15

VIII.	Chapter V – Summary, Findings, and Conclusions	17
	Summary	17
	Conclusions	18
IX.	Appendix I – Letter to Child Study Team Directors	19
X.	Appendix II – Letter to LDT/C’s	21
XI.	Appendix III – LDT/C Questionnaire	23
XII.	References	26

Chapter I

Statement of the Problem

Background

Originally, Learning Disabilities Teacher-Consultants (LDT/C's) were called remedial instructors. The Beatleston Bill, passed in 1959, was the legislation that enabled the remedial teachers to work as one member of a multi-disciplinary child study team (Davis and Hathaway, 1991). This person was experienced in educational assessment and remedial instruction to help children with specific learning disabilities as well as a variety of other learning problems. With the passage of PL 94-142, LDT/C's became members of the multi-disciplinary child study team that determined eligibility for special education.

In addition to their role on child study teams, LDT/C's have a broadened role function that has evolved so that it is now divided into five separate areas:

1. Educational consultant to school staff
2. Member of a child study team
3. In-service provider
4. Collaborating on individualized education plans
5. Assessing and analyzing children's learning styles

As the number of special education students grows, school districts are trying to hire more LDT-C's to handle the increasing caseloads. Even though there may be people within the district that are certified LDT-C's, administrators are having

to hire new graduates because those people who are certified do not want to leave the classroom.

Research Question

The data obtained will be used to answer the following research question:
Why do individuals certified as learning consultants choose not to work in that position?

Purpose of Study

The learning consultant's role on a child study team is an important one. A specialist in the area of administering and analyzing scores on standardized tests, the learning consultant must be able to give suggestions on how to modify instruction for a student in need of special services.

A learning consultant must have a Master's Degree and be certified by the State. Many people who become trained to fulfill these extra requirements either remain in the classroom or return to classroom teaching after spending time working as an LDT-C.

The purpose of this study is to examine what factors influence a person to leave the field of consulting, i.e., Are there certain personality types that remain? Do working conditions cause people to leave?

Value of Study

Currently there is no available research on this topic, so this study will provide valuable information to educators of graduate students in the field. The knowledge gained will help these educators by giving them a better idea of where to concentrate training.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Due to the lack of research on learning disabilities teacher/consultants (LDT/C's) who choose not to practice in their field but instead return to the classroom, this review of literature will include studies done on teacher turnover, specifically, teacher attrition. It is felt that some of the research on why special educators leave the field will have generalizability to LDT/C's who have left their positions.

Teacher turnover is a concern in the area of special education. Public schools are having difficulty retaining quality staff. Teachers hired to replace the teachers who have left are often not as well trained and lack the experience in terms of teaching. This is especially true in the field of special education, where many candidates are not even fully certified. There is a chronic shortage of special education teachers and this shortage will continue into the future unless interventions are started (Boe et al., 1996).

Teacher retention and attrition have been the focus of many recent studies. Researchers are trying to determine what factors play a role in teachers leaving the classroom for other pursuits. Their hope is that an understanding of those factors will help administrators design strategies to keep qualified, experienced educators in the field.

One factor associated with teacher retention is job satisfaction (Schlechty & Vance, 1983). Often it is not only satisfaction with the job but with the career in

general that is important. Teachers who are satisfied are less likely to change schools or leave teaching altogether than those whose work is unsatisfying in many areas (Marso & Pigge, 1997).

Job satisfaction can be broken down further into two factors—intrinsic and extrinsic (Schlechty & Vance, 1983). Intrinsic factors for teachers usually come from classroom activities. For example, whether their teaching is reaching students or how much control they have in their classroom. Intrinsic factors may also play a part in choosing teaching as a profession. Very few teachers enter the profession because of external rewards such as salary, benefits or prestige (Marso & Pigge, 1997).

Extrinsic factors are those that are outside a teacher's control. These include salary, administrative support and availability of quality materials.

Although, as stated earlier, extrinsic factors are not usually the reason one becomes a teacher, they are most often the reason one leaves teaching.

Teacher satisfaction has been linked to teacher attrition, as have some factors associated with satisfaction (e.g. student behavior) (Schlechty & Vance, 1983). According to a recent study, five percent of public school teachers left the field after both the 1987-88 and the 1990-91 school years (Bobbitt, et al., 1994). While some of those teachers left due to retirement, twenty percent left because they wanted to pursue other careers, they were dissatisfied with teaching, or because they wanted a higher salary (Schlechty & Vance, 1983). This so-called exit attrition is bothersome for administrators because it means an actual reduction in the teaching force.

A closer look into why teachers become dissatisfied and leave the classroom reveals many variables. Those factors that are personal characteristics of teachers such as, age, race, sex, level of preparation and certification were found to be related to attrition.

Age seems to be the most reliable predictor of attrition. All of the studies reviewed agreed on that point. Markedly higher rates of attrition have been reported for younger teachers, in both special and general education (Boe, et al., 1997). Fifty percent of America's beginning school teachers leave the classroom within their first seven years of teaching and never return; more than two-thirds of that percentage do so within the first four years (Byrne, 1998). The latter usually happens because the ideals that young teachers have about teaching fade after facing reality in a real classroom in today's world. These young teachers become victims of burnout. They start to realize they are not reaching all of their goals and develop symptoms of fatigue and hopelessness.

The attrition rate is also high for older teachers who are approaching retirement. Many teachers who have been teaching a long time leave before retirement because they cannot deal with the personal problems of today's students (Byrne, 1998). These students are faced with street violence, drug use and broken homes. Teachers, who sometimes need to act as social workers, parents, and psychologists, used to be well respected in the community. Students, and some parents, seem to have lost that respect, making it difficult for some teachers to feel in control of their classroom. This can lead to job dissatisfaction, which in turn can lead to attrition.

Another group of teachers at high risk for attrition are those with higher test scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the National Teacher's Exam (Miller, et al., 1999). In our society, teaching has been looked upon as a less than ideal career, especially by higher socioeconomic, well-educated families. There are now many more employment opportunities for the talented, highly educated children of these families and teaching is not usually the choice they make.

Variables such as gender, race, and certification may be related to teacher attrition, but there is a limited amount of research that include these factors (Miller, et al., 1999). The research reviewed that does include race does not always agree. Singer (1993) noted that race is unrelated to teacher attrition. However, other researchers found that African-American teachers are more likely to leave the classroom than are white teachers (Shen, 1997).

Certification is another area of disagreement. In some studies, teachers working with emergency certificates are included and on others they are not. On those studies which they are included, their rate of attrition is high. This might be due to their lack of experience in the field or not knowing what is fully expected of them.

As mentioned earlier in this report, extrinsic factors that are found to be related to teacher satisfaction are administrative support, salary and workplace conditions. With the exception of teacher salary, research has not shown consistent associations between teacher attrition and either school characteristics or working conditions. District salary distinguishes and significantly predicts attrition in special education teachers (Boe, et al., 1997). In schools in which

there was a higher salary for teachers with master's degrees and twenty years' experience, teachers were more likely to stay (Shen, 1997). Salary for beginning teachers with no experience was not as important a factor. Years in teaching, mean annual salary for all teachers and mean salary for senior teachers are all related to attrition. Lower salaries are associated with greater attrition (Brownell & Smith, 1992).

A lack of administrative support is also a factor that predicts teacher turnover. Current and former special education teachers indicated that a lack of support from administrative personnel was related to their intention or decision to leave the classroom (Miller, et al., 1999). When staff members are acknowledged for a job well done they are more likely to stay in the classroom. This type of behavior from administrators leads to job satisfaction.

The category of workplace conditions proved to be strongly related to teacher turnover. Teachers are more satisfied with their career when they receive cooperation from their colleagues, the resources needed to teach and when they are not burdened with non-teaching duties (Schlechty & Vance, 1983). Miller et al. (1999) note that special education teachers who felt they did not have sufficient materials and felt professionally isolated left the job more often. Pines and Aronson (1988) point out that schools are continually being held responsible for a number of things. This can make administrators put pressure on teachers and they in turn will feel overwhelmed, leading to unhappiness.

When teachers share their strategies for teaching and managing behaviors with each other it helps them feel less isolated and more confident in their abilities to

teach and manage their classroom. Administrators will have to help foster this collegiality, especially between general educators and special educators. They will also need to hire people who share this philosophy of support.

Teachers have not had a lot of power in school decisions. However, research clearly shows that teachers who feel they have influence over school and teaching policies are more likely to stay (Shen, 1997). In special education, insufficient involvement in the decision-making process correlated with teachers' decisions to leave the classroom (Billingsley & Cross, 1991). Therefore, allowing teachers to have a voice in school and classroom policy is one way to improve teacher retention. Anyone can use today's all-encompassing curriculum materials. Teachers should have the ability to change lessons and ideas as long as the school's curriculum is followed.

Summary

Teacher turnover is a term used for any change in teacher status from one year to the next. Attrition is a component of teacher turnover. Administrators are concerned with the number of teachers leaving the field for other careers. Given the finding that more young teachers are likely to leave in the first few years of teaching, the issues of teacher attrition and retention gain more seriousness. They are being required to emergency certify individuals who are interested in teaching, because certified people are leaving.

Although certain variables were found to be significant in the area of attrition, it was discovered that no one area had as great an impact on a teacher's decision to leave than her age. Young teachers are discovering that teaching in a

classroom is not always what they expected. When you put that together with low salaries and workplace conditions that are less than satisfying, you get teachers who are dissatisfied and looking for another job.

There is no single remedy for teacher attrition, especially since the major factor is teacher age. An administrator can do nothing to change that. However, school administrators can work on changing school and district policy in a number of ways, such as raising salary scales across the board and also making it more differential.

If policy makers can discover what makes their staff feel satisfied, they can work on implementing those changes. Teacher satisfaction can be shaped in part by favorable working conditions. These types of things are within an administrator's reach to change. A safe working environment, supportive administration, cooperative colleagues, and having the power to make decisions are all connected with teacher retention.

Chapter III Methodology and Procedures

Population

The population for the study consisted of certified LDT/C's who are not currently working in that capacity. A random sample of thirty school districts in Southern New Jersey was chosen from the following counties: Atlantic, Burlington, Camden and Gloucester. Letters (Appendix I) were sent out to the Child Study Team Directors in those areas asking them to identify any person who is a certified LDT/C but is not working on the Child Study Team.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation used in this study was a survey (Appendix II) consisting of questions designed to discover the reason or reasons people who are certified as LDT/C's either returned to classroom teaching or never worked as an LDT/C. The survey consisted of twelve questions and a comments section. The respondents were also asked their age, certifications held, years spent teaching, and years spent, if any, as an LDT/C.

Collection of Data

This survey was developed to be quick and easy to complete while still providing important information. Each question is rated using a Likert scale based on a score from one to four. The survey was sent to those people identified by the Child Study Team Director as certified LDT/C's who are not currently

working on a Child Study Team. A self-addressed stamped envelope was enclosed with the survey to make it easier for the respondents.

Once the surveys are returned, the items will be tallied and the questions will be analyzed to determine significance. Any additional comments that are made will be assessed as to information that should be included in the study.

This survey is meant to discover what reasons people have for becoming certified as an LDT/C, yet not working in that capacity.

Chapter IV

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

A letter was sent to thirty child study team directors in southern New Jersey asking them to identify any person in their district who is a certified LDT/C, but is not working in that capacity. Of those thirty letters that were sent out, twelve were returned, yielding a forty percent return rate. Fourteen people who met the criteria were identified and a letter was sent to them explaining the study and asking for their participation by completing a survey, which was included in the mailing. All fourteen surveys were sent back, yielding a one hundred percent return. The survey responses were tabulated and the comments that many respondents made were analyzed.

Results

Results of each question are given in actual numbers. In addition, any comments made specifically regarding each question will be included. The results of the personal information questions at the end of the survey will be listed first.

Section One: Results of Personal Information

1. Gender:	Response
Female	14
Male	0
2. Age:	Response
25-29	1
30-35	1
36-45	4
46-55	4
No Response	4

3. Years as an LDT/C:	Response
Less than 1	6
1-3	5
4-6	2
More than 6	1
4. Years spent teaching:	Response
1-10	2
11-20	4
21-30	4
More than 30	1
No Response	3
5. Certificates held:	Response
LDT/C only	6
LDT/C + one other	5
LDT/C + more than one other	3

Section Two: Results of the Questionnaire

This section will be presented in the same format as the statements on the survey with the number of responses and non-responses listed after each statement. Unless noted otherwise, there were seven people who did not respond to any of the questions.

1. *My caseload was reasonable in terms of the number of students I dealt with.*

Three people agreed with this statement. Four people disagreed with this statement and one of those people stated that her caseload of 124 students was inequitable when compared to other team members.

2. *All the materials and tests I needed were available to me.*

There were four respondents who agreed with this statement, three who agreed somewhat, and one who disagreed somewhat. There were six people who did not respond.

3. *My administrator supported and encouraged me.*

Four respondents agreed and three respondents disagreed with this statement.

4. *I had equal participation in child study team decisions.*

Four of the twelve women who responded to the survey agreed with this, two somewhat agreed, and one disagreed somewhat.

5. *I was treated with respect by special education teachers.*

Five respondents agreed, one agreed somewhat, and two disagreed somewhat with the above statement. There were six non-respondents.

6. *I was treated with respect by general education teachers.*

There were four people who agreed with this statement, three who agreed somewhat, and one who disagreed somewhat. Six people chose not to respond. One person noted that child study team members are, in general, not respected by teachers.

7. *I had a lot of paperwork to do at home that I could not finish during the regular workday.*

Everyone who responded either agreed (five) or somewhat agreed (two) with this statement.

8. *I feel that my education as an LDT/C thoroughly prepared me for the position.*

Five people agreed, three people agreed somewhat, and two people disagreed with this statement. There were only four who did not respond. One person made the following comment: "I did not feel prepared, although I know that experience will be the best teacher."

Representative Narrative Comments

This section will highlight some of the comments made by the respondents. Of the fourteen surveys that were returned, comments were made on eleven, some of which

were very extensive. The statements made by the women provide much insight as to why they either left the field or chose not to work as an LDT/C.

One woman shared, “I did not pursue a position as an LDT/C for a few reasons; Child Study Team members are generally not respected, the pay scale is the same, so I was not willing to give up my teaching position for a caseload and lots of parent problems.

Another woman, who worked as an LDT/C for one year, made the comment that she had an “inequitable caseload. I had 124, and others only had sixty, sixty-two, etc.” She also added that she would “never do this again!”

Six of the respondents said they wanted to have more contact with children and this was one of the primary reasons people left the field. “I enjoy working in a classroom setting,” said one of the respondents. Other comments made were: “I still feel the need to be in the classroom with the children,” “I decided I was not ready to leave the classroom,” “I could not wait to get back to the classroom where I could once again have a positive daily effect on my students.”

A few of the women who responded cited too much testing as a reason for either not entering the profession or leaving the position. “I found that LDT/C’s worked only with ‘tests’ with kids,” “The monotony of testing was less rewarding than teaching,” “The position just ‘tests’ now because of the large number of students.”

The comments made by some of the respondents were very helpful in determining what factors cause people who are certified LDT/C’s not to work in that position.

Summary

Of the fourteen surveys that were returned, six of those respondents worked as an LDT/C for less than one year, with five of the six never having worked in the position at

all. These respondents never entered into the LDT/C position for a number of reasons. One common feeling that all of these women shared was the desire to work closely with students on a regular basis and as an LDT/C that is usually not the norm. A few shared the belief that LDT/C's do too much testing. One respondent made the comment that the LDT/C's that she has talked to say they have little time to do anything but test. Only one person mentioned that the pay had anything to do with her decision not to work in the field, but that was not the sole reason she decided to keep her current job.

Those people who worked as LDT/C's and then left the field also had various reasons for leaving, but most went back to the classroom or to another position, such as guidance counselor, where they would have more of a positive effect on students. A few people felt they might go back to working as an LDT/C at some point in time, while two said they would never go back. One of these women said, "I found my position to be the most frustrating job I've ever held." Although four people thought their caseload was unreasonable, only one gave it as a reason for leaving.

There was not one statement on the survey that received either all "agree's" or all "disagree's". They were all answered in varying degrees. There was only one statement to which everyone either agreed or somewhat agreed and it dealt with paperwork. Everyone who responded felt there were many times when they had to complete paperwork at home that could not be finished during regular work hours. One other statement that most respondents agreed with was that special education teachers treated them with respect. Their regular education counterparts did not receive the same kind of response.

Chapter V

Summary, Findings, and Conclusions

Teacher turnover is a growing problem that many districts are challenged with. Attrition is a component of teacher turnover, with research showing that age is one primary reason that many teachers leave. Once they have a classroom of their own, new teachers, who are most often young, realize teaching is not what they expected. This research explores the reasons behind teacher turnover and the reasons why certified LDT/C's are not working in that regard.

Summary

Twelve out of thirty Child Study Team directors responded to a letter asking them to identify any person in their district who is a certified LDT/C but is not working in that capacity. Those twelve directors identified fourteen possible candidates for the study. Letters were sent to the fourteen candidates asking their participation in the research, along with a survey that asked them to respond to a number of statements using a Likert scale rating system. All fourteen surveys were returned, with many including comments as to why they either left the field or never entered into it. The results were analyzed and some reasons that people became certified and chose not to work in the LDT/C position were revealed. The most common reason being the respondents wanted to spend more time in the classroom with the children; working as an LDT/C does not involve spending as much time with children as it does with adults.

Too much testing and paperwork also led many of the respondents back to the classroom. The women felt that testing took up most of their time and many had paperwork to do at home each night that could not be finished during the day.

Conclusions

Why do people who hold certification as an LDT/C choose not to work in that position? The research presented here reveals that they left for a variety of reasons, but the major response was they wanted to spend more time with children.

This research indicates some areas of concern that Child Study Team directors should take a closer look at in regard to the learning consultant position. In order to reduce the amount of turnover, more specifically, the amount of attrition of LDT/C's, administrators should do what they can to lighten the caseloads in districts where the number is very large. This may help eliminate some of the frustration that current LDT/C's feel by reducing the amount of paperwork and daily case management duties.

Another area that administrators could have an effect on, that was mentioned by the respondents, was the pay scale. LDT/C's are on the same scale as teachers, but many feel the amount of work that an LDT/C is responsible for deserves a higher salary scale.

Unfortunately, it does not seem as though the universities that are preparing students to enter into the profession can do much to change it. Most respondents felt as though their education prepared them to work in the LDT/C position, and most of the issues that the respondents felt strongly about cannot be fixed by altering the coursework. It may be helpful to require that any internship or practical experience be done on actual child study team so that a person gets a better picture of what the job truly involves.

Appendix I

Letter to Child Study Team Directors

November 18, 1999

Dear Child Study Team Director,

I am a graduate student in the Learning Disabilities program at Rowan University and in the process of writing my thesis. The purpose of my project is to survey former students who are certified LDT/C's and chose not to work as Learning Consultants on a Child Study Team.

I am requesting your help in identifying any individuals in your district who are certified learning consultants and are not working in that capacity. I would like to send these people a short survey so that I may gain insight into the reasons why they either left or never joined a child study team.

Please use the enclosed envelope to forward to me the name and address of anyone who may be a potential participant. A letter will be sent to them requesting their voluntary cooperation in the study. If there is no one in your district, please note that and send me your reply.

I am looking forward to your prompt response. Thank you in advance for your time and effort.

Sincerely,

Julie Mason
Graduate Student
Learning Disabilities Program

Appendix II
Letter to LDT/C's

December 7, 1999

Dear _____,

I am a graduate student in the Learning Disabilities program at Rowan University and in the process of writing my thesis. The purpose of my project is to survey people who are certified LDT/C's and chose not to work as Learning Consultants on a Child Study Team or returned to classroom teaching after having worked as an LDT/C.

Your name was given to me by your Child Study Team Director as a possible participant in my research. I would appreciate it if you would take a few minutes to fill out the enclosed survey and then return it to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope that I have included. Your answers will be strictly confidential and used only for the purpose of my study.

I am looking forward to your prompt response. Thank you in advance for your time and effort.

Sincerely,

Julie Mason
Graduate Student
Learning Disabilities Program

Appendix III
LDT/C Questionnaire

SURVEY

Please rate the following items by circling the number that best characterizes your feeling about each question. If you never worked as an LDT/C, please skip Items 1-13 and just describe in the comments section why you chose not to.

1. My caseload was reasonable in terms of the number of students I dealt with.

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree
1	2	3	4

2. All the materials and tests I needed were available to me.

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree
1	2	3	4

3. My administrator supported and encouraged me.

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree
1	2	3	4

4. I had equal participation in child study team decisions.

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree
1	2	3	4

5. I was treated with respect by special education teachers.

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree
1	2	3	4

6. I was treated with respect by general education teachers.

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree
1	2	3	4

7. I had a lot of paperwork to do at home that I could not finish during the regular workday.

Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree
1	2	3	4

8. I feel that my education as an LDT/C thoroughly prepared me for the responsibilities of the position.

Disagree
1

Somewhat Disagree
2

Somewhat Agree
3

Agree
4

9. Please indicate your gender. _____

10. Please indicate your age. _____

11. Please indicate how many years you worked as an LDT/C. _____

12. Please indicate how many years you have worked as a teacher. _____

13. Please indicate the degrees/certificates you hold. _____

Please feel free to add any comments that you feel will be relevant to this study.

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