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# An Analysis of Pre-Service Versus Experienced Special-Education Teachers' Perceptions of Attrition

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An Analysis of Pre-Service Versus Experienced  
Special-Education Teachers' Perceptions of Attrition

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the degree of

Master's of Education

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Cedarville University

Author Note

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### Abstract

In this quantitative study, I assessed the presence of factors related to attrition in pre-service special educators. I surveyed 23 pre-service special educators regarding various attrition factors identified in the research literature and then compared their responses to the perceptions of 32 seasoned special educators to test for statistical significance. Participants were located at a large, public university in the southeast United States and the largest public-school system in proximity to the university. The results of the study indicated that attrition factors may be evidenced in pre-service educators and therefore detectable prior to entering the teaching field. The study also found that pre-service educators frequently had low expectations for what they would face. For instance, compared to the reality reported by the experienced educators, the pre-service educators expected to do more work and have fewer resources available to them. However, they also expected there to be more collaboration and support, and they expected areas such as paperwork to be more meaningful than the experienced educators reported was the case. The results help to direct future research by noting areas in which the expectations of the pre-service educators differed from those of the experienced educators, such as the expectation of building relationships.

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An Analysis of Pre-Service Versus Experienced  
Special-Education Teachers' Perceptions of Attrition

**Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study**

Based on the fervor with which educational professionals discuss teacher attrition, some might believe a new conundrum exists within the realm of education. However, teacher attrition is not a new issue within the field of education. Researchers reviewing literature that is more than half a century old would find the issue dominating the educational landscape. Indeed, some of the earliest educational research highlighted the still-unresolved problem of teacher attrition.

In a nearly 60-year-old article, researcher Werrett Charters (1956) noted that, from the mid-1930s to the 1940s, significant alarm was raised regarding the exodus of teachers from schools. Prior to this time, the issue of attrition rarely elicited discussion in the literature, and few studied or referenced the idea (e.g., Williams, 1932). Whether this lack of attention to the issue of attrition was due to oversight or the fact that public education was a relatively new development is unknown. However, after Charters's article, teacher exit rates began to be highlighted in the field of education research, and researchers were soon reporting a scene closely resembling the current educational landscape. That is, early research that delved into the specifics of educator attrition reported relatively high attrition rates, particularly with regard to the fields of math and science (White, 1960). Comparisons must be generalized, however, for other areas of education, including fields like special education and institutions such as private schools, which had not yet been formed or extensively developed by the mid-20th century.

While the 1950s and 1960s gave rise to educational research that predicted a relatively gloomy future for professional educators, the 1970s saw a general reversal of this trend, at least in

the reflections of authors such as Jonathan Mark and Barry Anderson (1978). While Charters's article alerted education professionals to a threat that had not received much attention, Mark and Anderson's report two decades later claimed that a surplus of teachers was remaining active for extended periods of time, which, in turn, placed a heavy burden on school finances. Though attrition was previously touted as an area of extreme concern, Mark and Anderson's attrition surveys showed sufficient evidence for them and others to conclude that, in fact, teacher saturation had occurred. Mark and Anderson were not merely stating that the problem of attrition had leveled significantly enough to match the growth rate of schools. Rather, they argued that the overabundance of teachers was actually harming educational institutions. Thus, researchers in education faced two competing claims — teacher attrition as a continuing problem or teacher saturation as an emerging problem — with each having vastly different methodological implementations and consequences.

As attrition rates appeared to decline, researchers advised educators on how best to handle the decreasing enrollment rates and student-to-teacher ratio problems (Zusman, 1978). Zusman, a researcher studying attrition around the same time as Mark and Anderson, proposed several solutions, including creating moratoriums on teacher leave policies, offering termination contracts to new teachers, and organizing a seniority structure to aid in laying off educators. With student enrollment peaking in 1970 and projected enrollment declining by as much as one million students by 1982 (Zusman, 1978), it appeared that America's 100-year-old public-education system had finally stabilized. In fact, this new research seemed to indicate that the system had actually overshot its intended target of reducing attrition and had pushed the pendulum too far in the opposite

direction. If attrition had ever really been a problem, it seemed as though the decline in student enrollment was going to more than counteract it.

Within two decades, the debate that had seemed significantly one-sided in the 1950s had become a polemical nightmare. While some understood the dangers of purported attrition, others found it was easy to dismiss the pessimism and apocalyptic evangelism of an institution known for its tendency to embrace the latest fads. More than that, the newest research in the 1970s seemed to show that acquiring teachers would no longer be a problem for schools (Mark and Anderson, 1978). However, such a conclusion is problematic for two reasons: (1) it fails to address how to combat attrition if student-to-teacher ratios increase again and (2) it does not take into account the fact that, regardless of a drop in student numbers, teachers continue to attrite. As modern attrition numbers and research show, having a surplus of educators does not mean that teachers are no longer leaving the field. Indeed, the findings of researchers such as Charters (1956), Elsbree (1959), Murnane (1987), and Yost (2006) have shown that attrition rates among educators have held relatively constant throughout the history of attrition research.

A sampling of educational history might initially seem to imply that teacher attrition rates fluctuate considerably. After all, Charters and Mark and Anderson — researchers separated by only a few decades — drew vastly different conclusions from the educational landscape of their time. However, a closer look suggests this conclusion may be misguided. While researchers in the 1970s projected a teacher surplus, Zusman (1978) and Mark and Anderson (1978) considered this surplus to be the result largely of lower student enrollment, not a stabilization in the teacher attrition rate. Though fluctuations in student enrollment may have offset the lack of teachers due to attrition, these changes did not significantly influence the overall rate of teachers exiting the profession.



Reflecting on the early 1970s, Murnane (1987) concluded that only 56% of educators were still teaching within six years of entering the profession. This conclusion references statistics taken from the same period during which researchers like Zusman and Mark and Anderson were claiming the attrition problem was dead. Murnane paralleled this 44% attrition rate of beginning teachers during the 1970s with similar rates found by Elsbree's (1959) research from the middle 1900s, four decades earlier, showing how the attrition problem had not stabilized at all. Instead, what had actually stabilized in the 1970s was the demand for educators. Meanwhile, the problem of attrition held relatively constant.

Although declining enrollments temporarily skewed the study of attrition, researchers were soon decrying the high teacher exit rate once again as student enrollment began to recover and rise starting in 1984 (Ingersoll, 2001). Meanwhile, teachers (particularly new ones) continued to leave the profession at what many considered to be unhealthy rates (Murnane, 1987). The influx of educational literature that continued into the 1990s and early 2000s did not appear to take a retrospective look at the once-prophesied stability in education. Educators could no longer rely on drops in demand to gloss over the glaring issue of schools maintaining their teacher supply. Regardless of demand, teachers were leaving the field. Since the mid-1980s, following the rise in student enrollment, researchers have largely dismissed the notion that student enrollment was a panacea for the attrition issue and have since been attempting to delve deeper into finding a legitimate remedy.

A flurry of attrition research was published in the late 1980s and early 1990s, indicating a re-acceptance of the seriousness of attrition and a recognition that the problem was not going to disappear. Families, schools, educators, and the government all had a vested interest in

understanding the state of teacher attrition and which factors lead to teacher instability. The studies generated over the past 30 years have given researchers a clearer picture of these factors than was previously evident.

Staying true to earlier trends, research showed that attrition rates in the 1990s remained around 14% for all educators (Kelly, 2004). By the next decade, attrition rates had risen to 15% for all public-school teachers (Luekens, Lyter, & Fox, 2005). At initial blush, data such as these may not seem alarming, since contemporary attrition may be more pronounced due to increased mobility in modern society generally (e.g., teachers transfer to other schools, follow spouses to new jobs, leave for family-related reasons, or retire [Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, Morton, & Rowland, 2007]). What is troubling, however, is that 29% of first-time teachers did not remain in their positions, and half that number left the teaching profession altogether (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Thus, the data indicate that the high rate of attrition was not due to “healthy turnover” as much as new teachers leaving the field.

Survey data from the early 2000s continued to look bleak, as the overall attrition rate for the 2003-2004 school year rose even higher, reaching 17% (Marvel et al., 2007). For public-school teachers under the age of 30, the attrition rate was around 24% (IES National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Marvel et al., 2007). Even more alarming than the high rates of attrition generally were data showing a deleterious trend among new teachers specifically. An estimated 34% of teachers left the education profession within three years of entering it (Yost, 2006). When the parameters were extended another two years, researchers estimated another 11% of teachers left the profession, bumping the attrition rate to 45% for the first five years of an educator's career (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Ingersoll (2003) found a similar result: the teacher attrition rate in the first five

years was around 46%. This is the same rate Murnane found in the 1970s and is comparable to the rates Elsbree and Charters declared in the late 1950s. Thus, the data once again indicate that attrition rates have been relatively constant over the last 60 years.

Though the high attrition rates among educators in general may seem overwhelming, there is an even more alarming trend in education: the attrition rate in the field of special education. Attrition rates among special-education teachers tend to be significantly higher than among other schoolteachers. During the 1988-1989 school year, for example, the attrition rate for general educators was approximately 13%; for special educators, it was 20% (Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002). A decade later, researchers estimated that the special-education attrition rate for the first five years in the profession was as high as 60% (Edgar & Pair, 2005), approximately 15% higher than the estimated attrition rate for educators as a whole at the same time.

Attrition in education has been a significant issue throughout the past century. However, attrition in the area of special education is a relatively new realm of study. Attrition rates historically have been high in education as a whole, but the significantly higher rate of attrition among special educators indicates additional study is needed in this area. Understanding attrition in the context of special education will not only aid in improving the quality of special education, but it may also advance our understanding of the less pronounced but still significant attrition rates in general education.

### **Definition of Terms**

Attrition: leaving one's current position in the field for any reason, such as temporarily leaving due to parenthood or illness, retiring, or changing fields altogether (Bozonelos, 2008)

Climate: the emotional atmosphere created by the actions, beliefs, and values of an educator's principal, community, and colleagues (Bozonelos, 2008)

Dissonance: a lack of agreement or alignment; the presence of tension

Efficacy: beliefs about one's ability to effect desired results, which in education, usually comes in the form of affecting students' learning (Fives, Hamman, & Olivarez, 2007; Ware & Kitsantas, 2007)

Highly qualified teacher: a teacher who has both a high level of certification and a high level of mastery in the subjects they are teaching (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008)

Inclusive classroom: a classroom headed by a general education teacher, containing students who are also overseen by special educators (Bishop, Brownell, Klingner, Leko, & Galman, 2010)

Individualized education plan (IEP): a document written to identify desired behaviors, modifications, and goals for a student entering special-education services (Wasburn-Moses, 2009)

Induction: support programs intended to assist teachers in areas such as mentorship, guidance, workload, and stress by providing feedback and training (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): an act passed by the U.S. Congress in 2001 that sought to ensure, among other important goals, that a highly qualified teacher is placed in every classroom (Bouck, 2005)

Pre-service educators: future educators who are participating in a teacher education program prior to the completion of their final student-teaching internship (Wasburn-Moses, 2009)

Retention: keeping or intending to keep the current position held (Billingsley, 2004; Bozonelos, 2008)

School climate: may include a wide variety of variables such as the morale of staff, availability of resources, parent-teacher interactions, and administrative support (Billingsley, 2004)

Snowball sampling: a sampling method in which a qualifying participant is identified and further participants are gleaned from their suggestions

Team: a group of educator collaborators who work with the same students (Vanheule, Lievrouw, & Verhaeghe, 2003)

TEP: teacher education program (Wasburn-Moses, 2009)

Two-tailed *t*-test: a statistical test that determines significance in either direction

### **Statement of the Issue**

Researchers estimate that attrition rates are as high as 60% in the first five years of a special educator's career (Edgar & Pair, 2005). Compared to the relatively consistent attrition rate among general educators, which has hovered around 45% for the past 60 years (Elsbree, 1959; Marvel et al., 2007; Murnane, 1987; White, 1960), the special-education attrition rate is abnormally high. Special educators are leaving a much smaller field at a rate that is 15% higher than that of their colleagues in general education (Edgar & Pair, 2005). Interestingly, despite their higher rate of attrition, the reasons special educators give for leaving the field do not differ from those given by general educators (Fore et al., 2002), though some reasons for leaving may be more pronounced among special educators. Because attrition research has dealt with educators in general for a much longer period and many sources of data, such as the *Schools and Staffing Survey* (see, e.g., Connelly & Graham, 2009), often fail to distinguish between subsets of educators, attrition in general has been the starting point for delving into the issue of special-educator attrition specifically.

As with any profession, attrition in the field of education is to be expected. Workers leave their jobs for a variety of reasons, including retirement, better opportunities, and family issues. However, the number of professionals leaving the field of education is exorbitant, and many of those who are leaving are theoretically more qualified than their peers who remain, at least with respect to their scores on standardized tests (Billingsley, 2004; Borman & Dowling, 2008). It is normal for some educators to leave, but it is concerning that such a large number of individuals who have sacrificed a great deal of resources to become qualified continue to attrite. The pronounced differences between the attrition rates of general and special educators raise the alarm for research developed with an eye toward reform (Edgar & Pair, 2005). One question that naturally arises from this discussion is which entity needs to be reformed in order to improve retention. Do the attrition mechanisms exist within public schools, TEPs, individuals, or all of the above?

Much research has been conducted regarding the attrition factors of active teachers, but few have taken a substantial look into the halls of higher education. Researchers need to take a closer look at TEPs to assess whether attrition factors can be detected and mitigated *before* an educator enters the teaching profession. This call does not imply that these institutions and TEPs are irresponsible in their current dealings with students. Rather, this next step in the research needs to be undertaken to inform the realm of higher education on best practices with regard to educating high-quality, lasting educators.

### **Scope of the Study and Delimitations**

The research literature provided the structure to help focus my questioning concerning attrition factors and teacher perspectives. In this study, I collected data regarding pre-service special educators' perceptions of their future roles as teachers and experienced special educators'

perceptions of their current roles. I focused on attrition factors commonly identified in the literature, using survey questions that closely followed those used by Wasburn-Moses (2009). I selected this line of questioning because it touched on the main factors identified in the attrition literature as a whole and because it was from one of only a handful of studies I found that compared pre-service educators' perceptions to those of experienced educators. I analyzed and compared data I collected on the perceptions of 23 pre-service special educators regarding what they thought their future roles as educators would be like with data on the perceptions of 32 experienced special educators who were currently employed in a teaching position regarding their current roles. I focused on pre-service special educators who were enrolled in a TEP but had yet to begin their teaching internship. Since cooperative teachers are so influential in the development of future educators (Cook, 2007), the perceptions of educators who had begun their student teaching might have reflected the influence of their cooperative teacher rather than their TEP training, so I did not include these educators in the study. Moreover, I did not sort any of the educators according to their current or desired certificates beyond their special-education degree. While some states certify special educators based on the severity of the disabilities they will encounter, the majority of the literature I surveyed did not seek to ensure any such sorting. Whether the lack of sorting in these studies was due to the small population size of special educators or the relative infancy of studies related to special educators (compared to studies regarding general educators) is unknown. Regardless, since the literature does not push sorting of this type and the statistics used to represent special educators in this paper are largely generalized to the field as a whole, I deemed it unnecessary to add such a qualification to this study.

For the experienced educators, I limited the data collection to educators who had completed at least three years of service. When focusing on the beliefs, practices, and themes of educators as an operative criterion, I chose to utilize special-education teachers who had at least three years of teaching experience in order to limit any potential overlap between the influence of their TEPs and the current state of education, thereby increasing the likelihood of generating accurate data. Selecting current educators who had recently left college could have provided a skewed view of the current state of education, as they would have been in the process of transitioning from a TEP to a classroom. I believed teachers with at least three years of experience would better represent the current mood of the educational field by having significant, real-life experience in the classroom while being sufficiently removed from their TEP to avoid inexperienced observations. The largest percentage of educators attrite within the first three years of their career (Yost, 2006), and attrition is largely linked to the misalignment of perceptions with reality (Fore et al., 2002; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010; Vanheule et al., 2003; Wasburn-Moses, 2009). Thus, I posited that three years would be an adequate amount of time for accurate beliefs to form. Furthermore, compared to public schools, private schools have higher attrition rates and a wider range of structures, and they typically lack special-education programs. Due to these factors, I chose to focus my research solely on experienced public-school educators and pre-service educators who were enrolled in a public university.

Moreover, I limited the geographical region of the study to the southeastern United States. While some of the research literature surveyed is representative of the United States as a whole (e.g., Luekens et al., 2005; Marvel et al., 2007), several sources focused on particular states or geographic regions, such as Indiana (DeMik, 2008), the western United States (Gersten, Keating,



Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001), and Texas (Richardson, Alexander, & Castleberry, 2008). This study uses quantitative methodology, which is context-specific by nature, and will provide data for future researchers to use both as a baseline and for comparison. As such, this study is not intended to answer ultimate questions regarding teacher attrition. However, as a seminal study, it will make a marked contribution to understanding the relationship between TEPs and teacher attrition.

### **Significance of the Study**

Decades ago, some researchers concluded that paying for experienced teachers was too costly (Mark and Anderson, 1978). However, many contemporary researchers are now decrying that a lack of experienced educators due to teacher attrition is most taxing on the educational system, both financially and academically (Kaff, 2004; McLesky & Billingsley, 2008). First, estimates show that public-school attrition can cost the educational system more than \$7 billion a year (Hancock, 2009). Furthermore, high attrition rates mean administrators and staff have to not only spend money advertising job openings due to vacancies but also consume valuable time going through the process of hiring and training new teachers (Billingsley, 2004). Above and beyond the actual expenditures in time and money, staff and administrations also find themselves in an opportunity-cost deficit. The necessities related to accommodating new hires compete for the valuable resources that administrations could be spending on other materials and programs.

Beyond the basic monetary cost of hiring a new teacher, the loss of a special-education teacher negatively affects a school's special-education program. Due to the nature of special education, team cohesiveness is essential to a successful program. Current staff must familiarize every new hire with the program's setting, students, and personnel (Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). Furthermore, inexperienced new hires have to spend time acclimating to the environment,

which results in a loss of labor that would not occur if the program was staffed with a stable group of experienced educators. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, experienced special educators are often able to build long-term rapport with their students, as an individual student may be under the watch of a particular special-education teacher for the entirety of their middle- or high-school career. Although a new hire may eventually be able to build such relationships if they remain in their position, this may come at the cost of inroads that had already been laid with the time spent by previous educators. In the end, high attrition rates force schools to hire new, often inexperienced educators to fill positions. This process wastes valuable time, and the lack of experience and familiarity of new hires negatively affects student success and fosters low-quality services, as new teachers are likely to be short on the characteristics and resources that experienced teachers bring to the special-education classroom (Connelly & Graham, 2009; Dorman, 2003).

In addition to being a financial and academic burden, attrition is also deleterious to the educational structure of a school and its programs. Each year, many special-education vacancies go unfilled or are filled with partly qualified teachers (Connelly & Graham, 2009). When a special-education teacher leaves a school, the remaining special educators must shoulder the burden of managing the caseload that he or she left behind. Furthermore, if an under-qualified, under-trained individual fills the vacancy, as is quite possible in special education, the other teachers must take on the task of training the new hire and covering for their deficiencies. Research has shown that increasing the workload of educators increases the likelihood of future attrition, further perpetuating the cycle of demand for highly qualified teachers (Zeichner, 2003).

In light of this discussion, the present study is significant because it will contribute to potentially reversing the attrition trend, combating the negative effects of teacher turnover. This

study seeks to attack attrition proactively by addressing the attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of pre-service educators that may lead to attrition, based on the current attrition research. Findings from the present study can be used by future researchers to help document better strategies for reducing teacher turnover. Additionally, the study will positively contribute to administrators' decision-making strategies as they utilize best practices in hiring decisions. This study pursues an answer to the long-standing question of how attrition should be handled instead of merely adding to the plethora of research that attempts to either convince administrations that attrition exists or help them mitigate the effects of a problem that could potentially be resolved earlier. That being said, this study only scratches the surface of the issue, attempting to open up the field to newly focused research and provide future researchers with further avenues to pursue.

### **Methods of Procedure**

The sample of pre-service special educators who participated in this study was taken from a large, public university in the southeastern United States. I employed a purposeful sampling of educators to acquire participants, corresponding with educators at the university, who then opened up their classrooms for the survey. Participants were enrolled in the special-education program at the university and had not completed their summative student teaching prior to completing the survey.

Many college freshmen change their majors, and some are not accepted into the degree program to which they apply. Thus, I selected only students who were already enrolled in the special-education program because it was important to the study that only committed and capable educators were included (Manuel & Hughes, 2006). It was also important that the interviewees had not completed their student teaching. The point of this research was to compare the education and

ideals that are inherent in or taught to educators prior to them entering the field with the perceptions of educators who have experienced the system firsthand. If any of the pre-service interviewees had taught at length in or spent significant time managing a classroom, the line between what they learned through their program and what they learned through their teaching experience could be blurred (Cook, 2007; Edgar & Pair, 2005). For the other sample population in the study, I drew the experienced educators from the largest public-school system in proximity to the university. To qualify for the study, participants had to have at least three years of experience teaching special education. I will discuss the sampling procedure in more detail below.

Due to the complex nature of teacher attrition, I perused the research literature to identify causal themes associated with special-educator attrition. This study focused on the comparison between pre-service special educators' perceptions of their future role as educators and the perceptions of current, experienced teachers in the field (Kaff, 2004). The surveys used in the study were based primarily on the survey found in Wasburn-Moses's (2009) study, which dealt with a hypothesis that was similar to mine. I expanded the Wasburn-Moses survey to provide more depth by categorizing the Wasburn-Moses questions and building on them with questions obtained from other attrition surveys (Bouck, 2005; Kaff, 2004). Two versions of the modified survey, which only differed based on a handful of demographic questions, were given to students in one of the public university's special-education classes and to a convenience sampling of non-tenured, public-school special educators (see Appendices A and B).

After collecting the surveys from the university students and experienced educators, I tabulated all of the data into one of the five categorical factors of attrition: ambiguity, experience, school climate, collaboration, and workload. I used this information for the data calculations and

analysis in the study, which were then used to shape a better idea about the consensus perceptions of educators (Bouck, 2005). I also compared the data from the pre-service and experienced educators to check for statistical significance.

### **Limitations**

This study was performed in a specific context and would need to be reproduced in other regional settings and on a larger scale for the conclusions to be extended (Fives et al., 2007). Furthermore, the small sample size indicates that there is a great deal of data still to be gleaned from educators and TEPs alike (Fives et al., 2007). This study is intended to be a pioneering look into the attrition factors that may reside within the individual prior to their surfacing in the field. It is a sample study to see whether further study is justified; it is not meant to be a conclusive end to this issue. Therefore, much more data needs to be collected on this topic for the results to be made more universally applicable.

It should also be noted that, while the attrition factors used in this study were compressed and limited, many of them, such as school climate, are still very broad categories that encompass a large number of subfactors. Although each of these factors and subfactors could have an entire study devoted to it, as Wasburn-Moses (2009) largely did with role ambiguity, I determined that it was first necessary to study whether attrition factors could be detected at such an early stage in an educator's progression.

Finally, it is difficult to know how attrition factors should be tested. I decided to compare pre-service educators with experienced teachers. However, experienced teachers may have acclimated to their environment by being fortunate enough to have been inducted into a good school and mentoring program, because they have a certain personality type that thrives on

challenges, or because they have been able to throw off their youthful ideals in order to survive.

Regardless of the means tenured teachers utilize to survive, I believe that limiting this study to experienced teachers allows us to develop the most accurate understanding of how the field really is, through the lens of experience rather than expectation. Nevertheless, this may be an area of contention for some researchers, as some may argue that inexperienced educators would provide a more desirable comparison due to their proximity in age, experience, and likely TEP-based expectations and preparation.

## **Chapter 2: Plenary Literature Review**

### **Current State of Attrition**

Due in part to the extremely high attrition rates in the field of special education, roughly 18% of job openings for special educators in the 1999-2000 school year were either left vacant or filled by a long-term substitute. Administrators in some states even went so far as to fill vacancies with educators who may not have been highly qualified (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Due to the lack of available professional special educators, many school systems decided it was be more beneficial to fill vacancies with under-trained individuals than to increase student-teacher ratios. At a time when NCLB required that all education positions be filled with highly qualified teachers, the attrition trend among special educators surpassed that of general educators and caused administrators to defy the law.

Further analysis of the data has brought the problem of special-educator attrition to the forefront. By 2009, the issue of attrition generally had become so widespread and unmanageable that the American Association for Employment in Education identified 13 educational fields with a considerable shortage of teachers; special-education fields accounted for nine of them (Provost, 2009). Moreover, the problem is not simply the shortage of special-education teachers but the shortage of highly qualified teachers in particular. Although general educators account for about nine times as many positions as special educators, they are statistically more certified to do their jobs. In the 1999-2000 school year, approximately 12.6% of special educators were only partially certified; among general educators, it was 10.5% (Boe & Cook, 2006).

The lack of highly qualified individuals in the special-education field is no small issue. When dealing with education, it is not sufficient simply to place someone in an empty spot in order

to fill a vacancy (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Research shows that highly qualified teachers (that is, those with a high certification status and knowledge of the content being taught) have a more significant impact on students and student achievement (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

McLeskey and Billingsley noted that the high attrition rate in special education has pushed some school systems to offer alternative means of certification that are attractive to prospective employees because they are less demanding and time-consuming than standard certification routes. While such actions have helped to draw in much-needed special educators to fill vacancies, they have also lowered the standards for certification. Furthermore, research has shown that teachers who are less qualified are more likely to attrite (Zeichner, 2003). Programs that deal with attrition by lowering certification standards may fill positions more rapidly, but they do not fill them more stably or fruitfully. Thus, it appears that many educational institutions responded to the demand for more special educators by merely tweaking the number of teachers, rather than fostering a supply that was stable and adequately trained. While some may have viewed that decision as an adequate solution to the attrition problem in the 1970s, researchers like McLeskey and Billingsley are now showing that this course of action has serious negative consequences.

### **Current Fixes in Light of the History of Attrition**

A brief look at the history of attrition studies and protocol illustrates the glaring problems that are inherent in an educational system directed by a simple supply and demand model, allowing the number of students to dictate the supply of educators. In the past, when student numbers fell, attrition was largely ignored and sometimes even supported (Mark & Anderson, 1978). When student numbers rose, administrators sought to hire more educators to meet the demand. However, due to a shortage of highly qualified individuals, school systems instead filled the vacancies with



poorly qualified individuals, who have a statistically higher chance of attriting than other educators (Zeichner, 2003). Addressing teacher attrition and the need for highly qualified educators through simple addition and subtraction temporarily solves the numbers problem, but it is not a solution for quality education or preventing teacher attrition. It is with this understanding that many researchers have begun to look at the reasons why teachers attrite in order to seek solutions that will stem its perpetuation and ensure higher quality education for students. Although the rate of attrition has remained stable over the last half-century, great advances have been made in understanding the factors that contribute to it.

A contemporary, inclusive philosophy of education advocates that children with special needs should participate in the mainstream classroom (Bishop et al., 2010). Therefore, in the modern classroom setting, general educators and students alike need the assistance of highly qualified experts in special education. However, high attrition rates among special educators mean it is increasingly likely that the number of highly qualified educators will be insufficient to meet classroom needs adequately. This is detrimental not only to special-education programs but also to general educators, who rely on the cooperation and wisdom of qualified special educators in their inclusive classrooms.

### **What Is Known About Attrition**

The data derived from attrition studies have allowed researchers and educators to draw some foundational conclusions about the factors that contribute to attrition. For example, researchers have known for some time that factor such as salary, support from administrators, and workload affect general attrition rates. Current research has greatly expanded this outlook, identifying additional areas, such as isolation, resources, and misguided expectations, that help to explain high attrition

rates, particularly for those in the field of special education (Gersten et al., 2001; McQuat, 2007; Richardson et al., 2008).

The significant research findings regarding the causes of attrition have led to reform in some schools, which have changed their structure to prevent the exodus of beginning special-education teachers as well as general educators (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). As reform inside schools progresses, a new call for addressing the attrition issue even earlier has begun to sound. Some recent research shows that teacher burnout may begin as early as student teaching (Fives et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2009), implying that at least a portion of the responsibility for teacher attrition may fall on TEPs. These findings bolster the need for further research to explore more fully the potential reasons for attrition among special-education teachers, including research that extends as far back as TEPs. Hopefully, as the causes of attrition are identified and addressed, such research will ultimately improve the quality of services afforded to students with special needs.

Researchers and demographic experts have painted a somewhat bleak picture of the educational field, particularly special education. Despite the relatively short existence of mandated special-education programs, a good amount of research has been done on the field. Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, and Danielson (2010) systematically detailed the history and philosophy of special education since its inception into public education. They also discussed early special-education trends that focused on specializing in particular disabilities, as well as the current era of inclusion and integration. Much of the research has documented the attrition in the field or focused on correcting the issues related to attrition. To that end, Brownell et al. (2010) concluded that contemporary expectations of teacher performance do not align with required TEPs or certification.

Thus, educators often find there is a dissonance between the programs intended to prepare them for the field and what they actually experience once they are in the field (Fore et al., 2002).

Although many research articles have documented issues that influence attrition in the educational field, my perusal of the literature found that relatively few researchers have gone to the source of teacher training and preparation programs (e.g. Wasburn-Moses, 2009). While it may be difficult to distinguish what portion of the burden should be placed on TEPs, they are the major source of certification for highly qualified teachers and should not avoid scrutiny. Just as the problem of attrition continues largely because educators and researchers have long avoided addressing its causes, so it will continue to persist if researchers are not willing to scrutinize each point from which these causes potentially originate. Therefore, it is the job of modern researchers to take all of the information that has been discovered on teacher attrition and expound upon it. We have known for over 50 years that attrition exists, and we have known why it exists for more than 20 years. With all of the research on hand, there is ample evidence with which to pursue attrition factors all the way back to the genesis of a teacher's preparation. By doing so, TEPs might be better informed about how to adequately protect their students from future attrition.

Reformers have identified specific causes of teacher attrition based on surveys, observations, and self-reporting by educators. For instance, researchers have commonly observed special educators servicing students of four or more primary disability categories, an activity that Billingsley (2004) previously pinpointed as a common factor resulting in increased stress and potential attrition. Although many special educators are equipped to deal with a variety of disabilities, servicing multiple disabilities at one time requires educators to expend much more energy as they pull and implement a variety of strategies from their cognitive stores.

Research has also shown that educators are confused by role ambiguity. Special educators often find themselves treated as “jacks-of-all-trades,” as administrators utilize them in a variety of ways (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Special-education teachers may service an individual student with significant needs, many students in a self-contained classroom, or general educators and students in a regular classroom setting. Some special educators may experience each of these scenarios during the course of a single day. This role ambiguity can make mental preparation extremely difficult, as educators must transition between different environments and sometimes do not know what their day will hold.

Adding to the burden, special educators often report feeling isolated from general educators and overloaded with bureaucracy and paperwork, which prevents them from spending more time with students and their educational teams (Richardson et al., 2008; Wasburn-Moses, 2009). Special educators persistently ask for reform in schools and continue to rate these areas of employment among the reasons for their dissatisfaction and attrition (DeMik, 2008; Gersten et al., 2001; Nance & Calabrese, 2009). Many special educators join the profession, not for money or status, but because they feel they can positively impact the lives of their students (Manuel & Hughes, 2006). However, if they feel stymied in this endeavor, they may become discouraged, feeling as though they are not fulfilling their job as they had originally intended, as those in Manuel and Hughes's (2006) study reported.

### **The Role of TEPs in Attrition**

Some school administrators have examined the attrition problem from a different perspective — that high attrition rates point to a lack of rigorous preparation, a claim bolstered by data showing that the highest rate of attrition is among newer teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008;

Yost, 2006). If educators were inadequately prepared during their TEP, one would expect attrition rates to be highest during the first few years of teaching, as educators' expectations and realities begin to merge. Thus, one would surmise that educators who are well prepared or better suited to dealing with the stresses of learning on the job are able to withstand the attrition factors they face, while the rest drop out of the field (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010).

In this line of reasoning, the blame should fall on the schools in which teachers are educated and trained, not the schools in which they are employed. The literature is rife with accusations concerning the heterogeneity of TEPs (e.g., Brownell et al., 2010; Zeichner, 2003). Researchers such as Wasburn-Moses (2009) have bolstered these allegations by pointing out that many special-education teacher programs fail to address the factors that lead to burnout. If the factors that contribute to teacher attrition are so clear, TEPs should be more homogenous in their curriculum, as they should all be preparing future educators to face the same sorts of issues that the research has illuminated. Although the TEPs are not directly responsible for the climate of the schools in which their graduates will be employed, they have the ability to prepare future teachers for the circumstances in which they will most likely be working. TEPs play a significant role in adequately equipping their students with the tools they will need to fulfill their roles as educators.

As both the demand for special-education teachers and the rates of attrition have risen, certain states have created short-cut programs to provide an easier road for educators to obtain certification or approval to teach in the special-education field (Gersten et al., 2001). This concept of short-term preparation is not only antithetical to NCLB, it also it goes against the existing mainstream research regarding national best practices for TEPs. Research on TEPs has highlighted a number of issues with the programs: various programs fail to provide adequate training (Fore et

al., 2002), student teachers too frequently receive relatively little significant classroom experience (Bouck, 2005), the curriculum focuses on inexperienced reaction instead of prevention (Oliver & Reschly, 2010), and programs fail to accurately portray the real world of education to their students (Le Maistre & Paré, 2010). With the addition of the certification short-cut programs, which some researchers have characterized as failures in institutional training (Connelly & Graham, 2009), the result of these problems could be an attrition rate that will remain high until TEPs address the root issues.

The bulk of studies on the topic of attrition within special education focus on the causes of attrition in the workplace. Some articles have broken away from an *ex post facto* approach to understanding the issue (Bouck, 2005; Oliver & Reschly, 2010; Wasburn-Moses, 2009), but there is still relatively little research regarding TEPs and pre-service teachers. The research is saturated with studies seeking to understand why special educators attrite, and researchers on the subject report relative agreement (e.g., Gersten et al., 2001; Nance & Calabrese, 2009; Richardson et al., 2008). However, relatively little is known about the attrition indicators that may be present in pre-service educators.

### **Previous and Future TEP Attrition Research**

The trend in overlooking TEPs has slowly begun to change in more recent research. Some scholars have written about best practice TEPs, student teaching, and various other pre-teaching issues (Fives et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2009). However, these studies tend to be the exception, and the relative lack of scholarship in these areas means that many more questions remain unanswered. If the educational field truly wants to identify and address the foundational causes of

teacher attrition and the means of preventing it, especially in the area of special education, then there is a significant need for more studies on TEPs and pre-service educators.

The significant amount of literature dealing with special education and teacher attrition provides an abundance of information that TEPs could use to address the shortcomings in their programs. Clearly, TEPs lack the control and foresight to determine some of the attrition issues their students will face, such as how many hours a day they will work, how many clubs they will sponsor, and how supportive their administration will be. However, TEPs could use the common themes found in the research literature to shape the expectations and preparation of future educators so they will be equipped to not only survive as educators but also thrive. It is important to note that the research concerning TEPs is not intended to imply that they are malicious or neglectful programs that are failing to educate teachers. Rather, it is intended to explore how well these programs are incorporating real-world data and issues into their curriculum. While TEPs may be doing a tremendous job of teaching future educators how to teach and care for students, it is vital that they also care for their own, teaching educators not only how to educate but also how to thrive personally as they interact with parents, co-workers, and school administrations.

My survey of the literature produced five recurring areas that TEPs could address by providing pre-service educators with more information or experience: experience, school climate, role ambiguity, workload, and collaboration. While all of these areas also apply to general educators, they prove to be more pronounced for special educators. These areas consistently appear in surveys of the attrition literature and stem directly from the work of Wasburn-Moses (2009). Nevertheless, if these five areas were explored more by researchers and addressed by TEPs, significant headway could be made in special-educator attrition.

Although the five attrition factors identified in this study are not the only areas identified in the literature, they are the major areas identified in Leah Wasburn-Moses's (2009) study of pre-service educators, which is central to the investigation of pre-service educators in the study at hand. Wasburn-Moses focused on pre-service educators and their perceptions, comparing their expectations to the perceptions of experienced teachers. Because her study centered primarily on educators' expectations of their roles, most of her questions revolved around how much time would be spent completing certain tasks, such as teaching reading, teaching study skills, etc. However, she also included a table consisting of questions that largely diverged from this general line of questioning, highlighting eight ideas related to attrition: behavior, lack of support, excessive paperwork, meeting student needs, high caseload or class size, lack of input, general overload, and insufficient resources. Thus, the Wasburn-Moses questionnaire set the tone for future research comparing pre-service educators with experienced teachers, though it did not provide a conclusive structure for follow-up. Wasburn-Moses focused primarily on pre-service educators' perceptions of their roles, fleshing out her research with a variety of questions. However, her research left other broad questions and categories unexplored. Using Wasburn-Moses as a springboard, I also explored other studies that used questionnaires (Bouck, 2005; Kaff, 2004), as well as the attrition literature generally. In the end, I decided to focus on the five attrition themes identified by Wasburn-Moses.

#### **Attrition Factors Identified from the TEP Research Literature**

**Experience.** The first factor related to teacher attrition identified from the literature revolves around experience. Research has shown that age is the only significant demographic indicator of teacher attrition (Billingsley, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001). Although TEPs cannot change a student's demographics, they are able to add experience to their program's requirements. The high attrition



rate for young teachers is indicative of new, inexperienced teachers entering the field (Bouck, 2005; Connelly & Graham, 2009; Edgar & Pair, 2005). Their inexperience as teachers may push them to attrite due to feelings of failure or unpreparedness or their expectations and ideals not being met (Fore et al., 2002; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010; Vanheule et al., 2003; Wasburn-Moses, 2009). While various other reasons could be responsible for this attrition (e.g., younger individuals may be more mobile, taking time off to advance their education, etc.), researchers tend to agree that such findings reflect young educators' inexperience. Assessing the 1999-2000 *Schools and Staffing Survey*, Connelly and Graham (2009) noted that teachers with less than 10 weeks of student-teaching experience were nearly 17% more likely to attrite than those with more than 10 weeks of experience. While education programs cannot affect the age of new teachers, they can add to their level of experience.

TEPs should be aware that experience not only reduces the rate of teacher attrition, it also creates and solidifies learning. Student teaching is not merely a rite of passage, a hurdle to clear before moving on to "real" teaching. Rather, it is an integral part of cementing a teacher's understanding of his or her position and a means of adding to the educator's repertoire (Connelly & Graham, 2009). College coursework is generally conducted inside of a classroom with peers. Student teaching is often one of the only times a pre-service educator gets to see theory in practice under circumstances that professional educators face daily.

Research supports the importance of student teaching to the formation of a teacher's practice. One study found that educators cited their cooperating teachers as being more influential than university coursework in how they addressed difficult moments, their teaching style and method, and their style of planning (Cook, 2007). In areas of core importance to educating students,

Cook found that students placed more weight on the several weeks of influence provided by their cooperating teacher than on years of college coursework and experience. If just a few weeks of student teaching are so influential in the formation of future educators, adding several more weeks or months of student teaching could potentially have a significant impact on attrition rates. Of course, it is possible that a student teacher's perspective on which experience carries more value may not translate into their future performance or experience, but it is certainly a good place to begin focusing the research in light of the current data.

**School climate.** The second attrition factor with which TEPs should be concerned is school climate. School climate represents a variety of attitudes and ideologies, encompassing administrative support; feeling understood and appreciated by the administration, parents, and other faculty; and the perception that you are being listened to and your needs are being met (Nance & Calabrese, 2009; Richardson et al., 2008; Thornton et al., 2007). Since school climate is correlated with factors such as student and staff effort and student achievement, a drop in the quality of the school climate creates an atmosphere in which it is more difficult to work, which leads to higher rates of teacher attrition (Bozonelos, 2008). Declines in the quality of school climate are particularly damaging due to their cyclical nature. A poor school climate detrimentally affects staff effort, which leads to decreased student achievement due to both the poor climate and the resulting decrease in the quality of the teachers. Decreasing student achievement further affects the school climate and is discouraging to teachers, causing them to perform even worse.

Although TEPs cannot directly influence the quality of their alumni's school climates, they can educate their students on how to cope with poor school climates and proactively foster good ones. Educators themselves are part of a school's climate and may not always be able to rely on

their school's administration to make the first move to improve a bad situation. TEPs could better prepare future educators by helping them to understand when and how to positively influence their school's climate with regard to parents, administrators, and other faculty, including teaching educators about realistic expectations and responsibilities when working alongside administrators and how to deal with various parental issues and other scenarios. As with the issue of educators' age and experience, a good TEP could address the issue of school climate by providing future educators with hypothetical and real-world experiences prior to sending them out on their own. A TEP's curriculum may need to focus on more than just pedagogy in order to prepare students for their future positions as educators.

**Role ambiguity.** The third attrition factor gleaned from the literature is role ambiguity. Unlike experience and school climate, both of which factor significantly into general-educator attrition as well as special-educator attrition, role ambiguity is one of the attrition factors that is more specific to special-education teachers. In education, role ambiguity characterizes a job in which the employee holds a wide variety of roles (Fore et al., 2002). Sometimes this means an educator is performing a task they did not expect to perform, but it can also occur when an educator performs so many different roles that his or her job begins to seem unclear or overwhelming. Bozonelos (2008) reported that role ambiguity is a factor that should be taken seriously, as certain groups of educators who face it have exhibited a burnout rate of 65%. These teachers also reported feeling fatigued, depressed, and overextended; a reduction in feelings of personal accomplishment; and an increase in emotional exhaustion. Role ambiguity frustrates individuals as it makes preparation more difficult and blurs their feelings of purpose. This, in turn, can also affect the other

aforementioned attrition factors, such as school climate, as a teacher who faces the problem of role ambiguity may become less effective in the classroom.

Attrition is a problem that is important to the field of education, but it is also an indicator of issues within an educational institution, such as role ambiguity. Attrition can be costly in terms of both finances and academics, as it causes highly qualified teachers to leave the field, but it is also bad to have teachers continue working in education when they are not performing as well as they should be. A high attrition rate among special educators may indicate that those remaining in the field continue working under circumstances that may not be ideal for their effectiveness.

Once again, TEPs will not be able to equip every special-education teacher perfectly and specifically for each situation they will face. Special educators face a plethora of job requirements ranging from solitary paperwork to team teaching. Moreover, many of these requirements vary significantly based on the particular individual, school, county, or state. Nevertheless, it is important for TEPs to address all aspects of a special educator's expectations, and pre-service teachers should be made aware of the possible roles they will face. While this can partly be accomplished by introducing pre-service educators to the variety of roles they may experience (Edgar & Pair, 2005), a major component lies in helping teachers recognize their purpose as a teacher. Many enter the field of education with good dreams and ideals, but these may not align with the realities of what they will actually face on the job, as Wasburn-Moses (2009) discovered. A good TEP could help to prevent attrition resulting from role ambiguity by assisting future educators in understanding the function and importance of the different roles they may face (Edgar & Pair, 2005).

**Workload.** The fourth factor related to special-educator attrition is workload. Although increased class sizes and paperwork also threaten general educators, the work burden on special educators may be even greater. The heavy governmental oversight of special education means that frequently changing legislation often leaves special educators feeling frustrated and confused (Nance & Calabrese, 2009). Nance and Calabrese pointed out that changes in assessment requirements may prevent teachers from teaching everything they want and have led to increased paperwork and longer IEP meetings. Beyond a simple desire to avoid wasting time on what educators perceive as unnecessary work, Nance and Calabrese also described how special educators perceive the legislation as taking away time they would otherwise get to spend with their students. Many educators, whether special or general, entered the field of education to spend time teaching students, not filling out paperwork (Manuel & Hughes, 2006). Therefore, when the workload associated with tasks that are perceived as menial or impersonal increases, some educators may begin to feel as if they have lost their sense of purpose, which leads to burnout and attrition.

Although TEPs do not control legislation, they may be able to influence significantly the expectations and preparation of pre-service educators. A good TEP may be able to produce educators who are aware of the current legislative situation, have worked with the common paperwork and system requirements, and have realistic expectations of how their time will be spent. TEPs could also assist future educators by showing them why certain requirements have been implemented, as understanding the rationale behind seemingly unnecessary requirements may help educators to better appreciate the need for them. Maintaining realistic expectations and understanding the importance and application of a task can have a significantly positive influence

on educators' outlook (Fore et al., 2002; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010; Vanheule et al., 2003; Wasburn-Moses, 2009).

**Collaboration.** The fifth and final attrition factor addressed in the literature is related to collaboration (or lack thereof) and isolation. Wasburn-Moses (2009) studied the perceptions of pre-service educators compared with the realities faced by experienced special educators. One of the major areas of dissonance was the expectation pre-service educators had about how much time they would spend collaborating with general educators. Wasburn-Moses reported that nearly 45% of experienced special educators reported that they spent less than one hour a day collaborating with general educators. However, approximately the same percentage of pre-service teachers believed they would spend more than two hours a day collaborating with general educators. Accurate expectations are essential to teacher retention. Thus, when special educators must deal with large amounts of unexpected or menial paperwork and experience a lack of collaboration with other educators, this disconnect with their expectations can cause feelings of resentment, isolation, and depression, which may eventually lead to attrition (DeMik, 2008). Being tucked away from colleagues for the majority of the day causes many special educators to feel as though they are all alone instead of part of a cohesive team. Such isolation can cause them to lose their sense of purpose, feeling un-needed, helpless, and without support.

Some school districts have heeded the warnings about teacher isolation and adopted mentoring programs in their schools. Nevertheless, many schools still do not have an adequate mentoring program or provide any sort of induction at all (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). TEPs could inform their educators about one of the most dangerous causes of attrition and train educators to seek out a mentor and peer collaborator if one is not automatically assigned to them. While it is

important that school administrations be aware of the threat isolation poses to teachers, educators should be aware of the threat as well. A teacher prepared by a good TEP could be just as or more responsible, proactive, and effective regarding their own needs as an administration who must oversee the training and facilitation of hundreds of personnel.

The literature is clear regarding the causes of special-educator attrition, but the question of how well pre-service educators are trained remains very unclear. The literature is extremely lacking when it comes to assessing the expectations of pre-service educators and whether those expectations are appropriately aligned to what a teaching position actually entails. An educator's job does not merely consist of relaying information to students in a way in which they will learn. It also includes dealing with peers, parents, administration, and the educator's own personal needs. A TEP that desires to prevent attrition should not only prepare teachers for the teaching and equipping of students in a particular area of content, it should also equip educators to survive and thrive in the environment they will have to traverse when delivering material to their students. The two should not be seen as mutually exclusive, as the effort and quality of an educator rely on this climate.

Many attrition factors have been identified in the literature and are potential starting points for deeper investigations of TEPs. However, some of the literature on attrition has taken a different course in the hope of solving the attrition problem. While Wasburn-Moses has begun to take a closer look at TEPs and many other researchers continue to delve into other issues regarding attrition in the educational field, some have strayed away from trying to fix the overall problem on a macro scale, instead looking to the individual for an explanation of why some teachers remain in the field while others attrite. Some have focused on personal attributes and preparation as a solution (Bishop et al., 2010), while others emphasize self-reflection (Yost, 2006), a need for problem-

solving or coping strategies (Le Maistre & Paré, 2010), and personal resilience (Tait, 2008). The emphasis on individual solutions is a legitimate avenue to pursue, and those authors may argue it would render the current study unbeneficial. However, although one must acknowledge the merits of individual-focused research, it is evident from the literature that experience is a tremendously important factor in preventing attrition. Providing teachers with coping strategies can help them to deal with unexpected situations, but it is even more beneficial for teachers to be given experience in actually dealing with the rocky landscape that the last century of research literature has painted so clearly. While an individual-focused remedy may be part of the solution, other research indicates that preventing the problem is more important than training educators to react to it (Oliver & Reschly, 2010).

As the wealth of research literature paints an ever-clearer picture of the educational landscape, it is evident that something is missing. Teacher attrition has been a problem for over half a century. Continuing to move ahead and repeating the same research is redundant and merely tracks a problem of which researchers are already aware. Teaching educators to be self-reflective and resilient seems beneficial *prima facie*, but on its own, it is an incomplete solution to the attrition problem that ignores both current information and the information that could be obtained if researchers pursued other avenues. While some positive steps in aiding teachers have been taken in response to the attrition literature, such as the use of induction programs, such steps have been reactionary attempts to fight attrition factors after those factors have already had an opportunity to entrench themselves in an individual. This course of action does not mold a teacher's expectations but, rather, holds their hand while their expectations are demolished and reshaped. Curative procedures are certainly appropriate at times, but prevention when possible is preferable.



The research is clear regarding attrition resulting from unrealistic teacher expectations (Fore et al., 2002; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010; Vanheule et al., 2003; Wasburn-Moses, 2009). It is also clear that the majority of teachers attrite in their first several years of teaching — right after they have exited their preparatory TEPs (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Yost, 2006). The evidence, then, seems to point to a disconnect between the expectations of new teachers entering the field and the reality of what they actually face in the field. Therefore, the hypothesis of this study is that a dissonance exists between the expectations of pre-service educators and the perceptions of experienced educators.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

#### **Introduction to the Method**

I began this study by identifying my sample groups. I first located a university within the study region with a special-education teaching program and began the process of obtaining approval for the research. After I obtained approval for the study, the selected pre-service educators completed the study survey. Because I knew the pre-service educators would be a significantly smaller group, I used them to determine the cut-off range for responses from the experienced educators. The pre-service group consisted of 23 participants; the experienced group consisted of 32 participants.

The public university from which I chose my sample of pre-service educators required that I go through their own board approval process prior to engaging students. Thus, I contacted a professor within the education department, completed the approval process, and worked closely with the professor to obtain data.

I surveyed the experienced educators using the same general survey and introduction letter used with the pre-service educators. The only difference in the surveys was in the phrasing of the questions. The survey for the pre-service educators included questions about their future expectations, whereas the survey for the experienced educators asked about their current experiences and attitudes. The two surveys are included in the Appendix. I modified the general survey from the one used in Wasburn-Moses's (2009) study, which also surveyed the perceptions of pre-service educators versus their experienced counterparts. The modifications to the survey were made to underdeveloped questions that extended from peripheral areas of questioning in the Wasburn-Moses study. That study was mostly concerned with the roles of teachers and time spent

in particular settings, and other factors were only discussed briefly. Because my study was concerned with all areas of attrition, the survey required modification for my purposes.

To modify the Wasburn-Moses survey, I first identified and categorized the other questions that were only briefly addressed in the study. I surveyed the literature and identified the categories of concern when dealing with attrition. The literature survey yielded five basic factors related to educator attrition: experience, school climate, role ambiguity, workload, and collaboration. I also relied heavily on the work of Kaff (2004) and Bouk (2005), as their studies included surveys that provided questioning which expanded the limited questions found in Wasburn-Moses (2009).

Due to the locations of the two sample populations, I used different approaches to administer the surveys to each group. The wide geographical area in which the experienced educators were located meant they were less accessible than the pre-service educators, who were all located at the same university. Due to the larger number of experienced educators and the lack of a centralized location for them, I could not administer their surveys in the same setting as the pre-service educators. I used snowball sampling to select the experienced educators. I identified employees within the area's largest public-school system to receive the survey documents. They, in turn, passed the electronic survey link on to others within the same system. I closed the data collection after I had achieved a sample size comparable to that of the pre-service educators. This method differed from that employed with the pre-service educators. While the experienced educators received electronic copies of the same survey, I handed the surveys out to the pre-service educators in person, as was requested by the university's review board.

The study's small sample size lent itself best to being analyzed by an independent, two-tailed *t*-test because the effects were not directional. I was also interested in any differences that

might be evident between the results of the two groups, so I determined the two-tailed *t*-test was the most appropriate measure for analyzing the results. I analyzed each question for significance using a *t*-test, with significance noted at an alpha level of .05 or less. I then assessed the data for thematic patterns of significance according to the attrition factors identified in the Wasburn-Moses (2009) study and extended in the literature survey.

### **Rationale for the Method**

I selected the study region for two main reasons. First, the focus on attrition factors among pre-service educators is a sparsely studied topic in the literature. Selecting a region — particularly a small one — was a strategic choice in looking for signs of significance in an unsaturated field of study. It would be a significant risk of resources to fund a large-scale study of an issue that has not yet been saturated on a small scale.

Second, I chose the study region because my lack of funding and low mobility made it a manageable area to study. Extending the study to a significantly larger scale would have taken a tremendous amount of resources and time. Not only would this have been difficult to do in such an unsaturated area of study, it may have also led to less accurate results. It was important that the pre-service and experienced educators be studied in both temporal and spatial proximity in order to prevent the introduction of potentially confounding variables.

I used a two-tailed *t*-test to analyze the data because the test works well with small sample sizes. Arguably, normal distributions could be assumed for each sample, as they were taken within a particular region and, more specifically, within a particular public organization. However, data were taken using conservative assumptions, such as assuming unequal variance, to ensure that any significance held a higher confidence, particularly in light of the sample size.

### **Population of the Study**

I gathered the sample of pre-service educators from the largest public university with a special-education program in the study region. As such, the population was representative of pre-service special educators in the study region. Likewise, the sample of experienced educators was taken from the largest public-school system in proximity to the public university. I surveyed all of the potential participants from the public university, as only a small group fit the required criteria. Chosen participants had not been exposed to professional teacher influences and had been accepted into the school of education, which I deemed to indicate quality and commitment to the teaching profession. As a result, only about half of the special-education students at the university qualified for participation.

The public-school system from which I drew the experienced teachers contained a much larger overall population. To qualify for the study, teachers had to have at least three years of experience teaching special education. While I did not want the pre-service educators to be exposed to teacher and system influences so that I could accurately assess the influence of their TEPs, I wanted the experienced educators reflect their experience in the system. I chose three years of experience as a qualifier for participation because the literature showed that a significant portion of teacher attrition occurs within the first three years of entering the field (Yost, 2006). Thus, any teacher that had surpassed three years of experience was deemed to be sufficiently beyond the direct influence of their TEP and acclimated to the teaching profession and climate.

### **Methods of Sampling**

The first step for sampling was similar for both groups. I selected the largest public university in the region for obtaining the sample of pre-service educators. Due to the low number of

pre-service special educators at the university who fit the criteria, I surveyed all of the applicable participants at the university. Likewise, I drew the sample of experienced educators from the largest public-school system in the region.

The population of the public-school system from which I drew the experienced educators was not as limited as the university's. Due to the large number of special educators spread out over a broad area, I took a convenience sample of educators in the county and then provided the survey to several of them. Following this initial survey, I used snowball sampling to obtain the remaining participants.

### **Procedure**

**Instruments.** The literature survey identified five categories that contribute to teacher attrition, and the prominence of attrition issues found in the literature produced the questions present on the instrument. Using well-attested attrition factors from a plethora of sources led to high validity for the study. Wasburn-Moses (2009), Kaff (2004), and Bouk (2005) were particularly helpful in the formation of the categories, as their studies condensed attrition factors from the literature into surveys. Both surveys used in this study can be found below as well as in the Appendices.

The reliability of this study was also assisted by the literature survey. The instrument I used to gauge participants' perceptions reiterated categories using a number of different questions gleaned from a similar study by Wasburn-Moses (2009) and expanded using other attrition surveys, particularly those of Kaff (2004) and Bouk (2005). While statistical significance on one question may be a data point to pursue, reliability is increased by allowing patterns among categories to be identified. Although the scope of this study was not intended to identify why educators attrite,

providing clear, categorized data may allow the results of the study to lead to more beneficial follow-up studies.

**Data-collection methods.**

*Relevant ethical considerations.* There were very few ethical considerations for this study. I had originally planned to acquire the participants' names to attach to the data for my records in case I needed to follow up with individuals. However, this was deemed a higher risk to participant confidentiality than was necessary or appropriate, both by myself and by the participating university's institutional review board.

*Treatment variables.* The dependent variable in the study was the presence of attrition factors, as evidenced by discrepancies between pre-service educators' expectations and experienced teachers' assessments. I hypothesized that the attrition factors relied on the independent variable of classroom experience. I attempted to control for other independent variables, such as the type of institution, through my sampling methods. I did not control for the pre-service educators' future goals, namely whether they intended to pursue a career at a private or public school. I also did not specifically control for their prior experiences in public versus private schools or TEPs. However, I sought to generally control for these extraneous variables by selecting my samples from large, public institutions. Even if the pre-service educators had experience in secondary private schools or a private school's TEP, they would have had to acclimate to the large, public university TEP to make it into the education program. Likewise, experienced teachers surveyed in the large public-school system were only selected if they had three or more years of experience. Thus, while they may have had some residual influence from previous experiences elsewhere, their experience in the current system provided sufficient certainty that they had acclimated.

*Methods of data analysis.* I hypothesized that attrition factors would be detectable in pre-service educators. I gathered the data necessary to evaluate my hypothesis, as previously explained, and assessed it using a two-tailed, independent *t*-test assuming unequal variance and requiring an alpha level at or below .05 for significance. I used the two-tailed *t*-test for analysis because my hypothesis was not specific regarding whether pre-service educators would show more or less of a particular attrition factor. Rather, I simply hypothesized that attrition factors would be detectable. Due to my small sample size, I also assumed unequal variance, requiring larger degrees of difference to produce the same alpha level. Furthermore, I maintained the standard requirement for my alpha level at .05.

I detected the attrition factors in the dissonance that existed between the expectations of pre-service educators and the perceptions of experienced educators. After identifying several categories of attrition factors and surveying the two groups, I assessed the results for statistical significance. Any significance produced indicated a discrepancy between the expectations of pre-service educators and the real-world experiences of experienced educators and would, therefore, be a route to pursue in later studies. While documenting any significance and acknowledging that attrition can potentially be detected before educators begin their careers, I determined it would be useful to categorize the analyzed data so that the weight of particular factors could be assessed in order to guide future studies. Therefore, I not only assessed the questionnaire for statistical significance but also grouped categories with a heavier weighting to assess potential patterns.

*Safeguards to internal and external reliability and validity.* I took steps to protect both the internal and external reliability of the sampling and execution of the study. One of the biggest threats to internal reliability in the study was the sundry individual experiences the participants may



have had. It would have been impossible to control for all potential influences an individual may have had in their educational history. Therefore, instead of attempting to control the participants by screening for a plethora of variable experiences, I used a system that was already in place to screen participants on a broader level. Pre-service educators were screened twice, first for admission into the university and then for admission into the university's TEP. This particular TEP had a number of different requirements for applicants even to be considered for the special-education program. Applicants must (1) have 30 hours of service-learning experience; (2) have a minimum 2.8 overall GPA; (3) have completed core prerequisite courses, particular education and special-education courses with a minimum 3.0 GPA, and a basic-skills standardized test; (4) provide three professional references; and (5) write a two-page essay summarizing their learning experience and philosophy of education. While those entering the TEP had various educational experiences and a wide range of goals for their future teaching placement, they were deemed to be the best candidates to enter into a mainstream, public TEP. All of the pre-service special educators then went through the TEP curriculum and, regardless of prior experiences, had to align with the TEP standards to move on in the pursuit of their degree.

A similar process was in place for the experienced educators. While some may have taught in private schools at one time in their career or been educated at a private or out-of-state institution, all of the experienced educators were assimilated into a fairly narrow pool. All public-school teachers are required to have a valid teaching certificate, meaning that regardless of where they obtained their degree, they had to have met particular requirements and passed specific tests. Beyond the up-front requirements to be considered for a teaching position in a public school, experienced educators also had to pass administrative interviews and receive board approval from

the county. Regardless of each experienced educator's past experiences, the simple fact that they had been hired as educators was a significant filter for procuring a particular type of individual. Add to this the survey requirement of having three years of experience in the educational field, and the filter becomes even more selective.

Beyond the filtering mechanism of public institutions, I also structured the study to avoid potential threats to its validity. I surveyed each group only once, avoiding any issues that could have resulted from multiple exposures to the same sorts of questions. I also avoided issues of maturation by selecting an extremely particular group of pre-service educators. Studying the shift in the presence of attrition factors in pre-service educators would be an interesting and potentially beneficial topic, but doing so in this study would have introduced further threats to its validity and was considered beyond the scope of the present work.

## **Chapter 4: Results and Analysis**

### **Introduction**

I analyzed five categories of attrition factors: role ambiguity, school climate, collaboration, workload, and experience. I assessed each data point for statistical significance when comparing the responses of pre-service and experienced educators. For organizational purposes and to simplify future analysis, I also grouped the data into the five thematic categories of attrition factors identified in the literature and discussed throughout this paper.

### **Description of the Data**

For the first attrition factor, role ambiguity, I found no statistical significance between the data gleaned from pre-service and experienced educators. Table 1 shows the mean response from each group regarding their roles, with neither group showing a significant difference compared to the other. The pre-service educators appeared to have a relatively accurate grasp of what their future role as educators would entail.

The second attrition factor, school climate, produced several unexpected results. While many of the factors contributing to school climate, such as the responsiveness of co-workers and parents, exhibited no marked differences between the two groups, a few aspects stood out. As Table 2 shows, there was a significant difference in the areas of resources and administrative responsiveness, but the difference was in the opposite direction of what one might expect. The pre-service educators perceived that they would have access to fewer resources and that the administration would be less responsive than the experienced educators reported was actually the case. At the same time, the pre-service educators believed the public's understanding of their job would be significantly higher than the reality expressed by the experienced educators.

The third attrition factor, collaboration, contained two aspects in which the perceptions of pre-service educators differed significantly from those of their experienced counterparts (see Table 3). The first area of significance was the pre-service educators' belief that they would spend more time collaborating with administrators. The second area in which the pre-service educators' perceptions differed significantly from those of the experienced educators was team teaching. The results showed that the pre-service educators held an accurate view of their role in terms of their caseload, but they believed classroom teaching would be a more collaborative endeavor than the experienced educators reported it to be.

The fourth attrition factor, workload, contained the greatest number of questions that attained significance. Five of the seven questions I categorized as related to workload attrition factors produced statistical significance (see Table 4). The pre-service educators believed they would spend more time planning, more time assisting with clubs, and more time outside of class than the experienced educators actually reported doing. The pre-service educators also believed that the amount of paperwork encountered in the field would be both reasonable and beneficial and that the total work required of them would be reasonable. The only two areas in which the pre-service educators expected to do significantly less than their counterparts reported doing were related to paperwork and the number of students they were responsible for serving.

The final attrition factor identified in the literature was experience. However, since the effect of experience is the question being pursued in this study, I left that area largely untouched in the questionnaire. The pre-service educators were screened in large part based on their lack of experience. Nevertheless, I did ask one question related to experience on the survey. The literature was clear that students tended to report that their supervising teacher was more influential on their

teaching than was their TEP (Cook, 2007). Since the pre-service educators had not had their field experience at the time the survey was administered, I asked about their perceptions of their TEP's influence and effectiveness. Compared to their experienced counterparts, the pre-service educators believed their TEP was significantly more effective in equipping them to be successful in their careers as educators.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data using a two-tailed  $z$ -test for percentages and an independent, two-tailed  $t$ -test for means. I used the  $z$ -test to pull out significance in a few instances, particularly for items classified in the workload category, and to assist in identifying patterns and significance in the data. I used the independent, two-tailed  $t$ -test to draw conclusions for two main reasons. First, the test assumed the highest uncertainty, making it more difficult to attain a  $p$  value below .05. This assisted in increasing the confidence level and made false positives less likely. Second, the effects measured in this study were not directional. A two-tailed  $t$ -test ensured that any difference would be noted, not just one in a particular direction.

### **Conclusion**

The data indicated that pre-service educators exhibit potential attrition factors. This finding is magnified by the fact that significance was found in approximately one-third of the questions asked, though that significance was often in the opposite direction of what I expected. It is not within the scope of this study to determine how influential such factors are in an educator's future attrition. Nevertheless, it is more than apparent that these factors are exhibited prior to an educator entering the field of teaching and will need to be pursued before more conclusions can be drawn.

Table 1

*Role Ambiguity*

<u>Question</u>	<u>Pre-service</u>	<u>Experienced</u>	<i>p</i>
Time spent teaching reading and writing	7.78	6.66	$p > .05$
Time spent teaching core content	7.65	7.81	$p > .05$
Time spent teaching study skills	5.74	4.58	$p > .05$

Note: A list of the exact survey questions can be found in the Appendices.

Table 2

*School Climate*

<u>Question</u>	<u>Pre-service</u>	<u>Experienced</u>	<u><i>p</i></u>
Paperwork is beneficial and reasonable	6.35	3.42	* <i>p</i> < .05
Administrative availability	5.83	6.84	* <i>p</i> < .05
Public understanding of special educators	3.61	2.31	* <i>p</i> < .05
Amount of resources available	5.35	6.61	* <i>p</i> < .05
Amount of administrative support	6.83	7.41	<i>p</i> > .05
General-educator collaboration	5.65	6.12	<i>p</i> > .05
Special-educator collaboration	7.13	7.47	<i>p</i> > .05
Public valuation of special educators	5.09	4.12	<i>p</i> > .05
Parental support of classroom decisions	5.83	5.34	<i>p</i> > .05
Student respect for teachers	5.26	6.28	<i>p</i> > .05
Student valuation of work	6.00	5.12	<i>p</i> > .05
Student improvement	7.65	6.91	<i>p</i> > .05
Administrative appreciation	5.3	6.28	<i>p</i> > .05

Notes: \* denotes a *p* value found to be significant as defined by the parameters of this study. A list of the exact survey questions can be found in the Appendices.

Table 3

*Collaboration*

<u>Question</u>	<u>Pre-service</u>	<u>Experienced</u>	<u>P</u>
Time spent team teaching	6.74	4.74	* $p < .05$
Time spent working with administrators	7.35	5.29	* $p < .05$
Time spent consulting on caseload	6.52	7.16	$p > .05$
Time spent working with general educators	7.00	6.26	$p > .05$
Time spent in meetings	7.43	7.65	$p > .05$
Time spent working with parents	7.48	6.61	$p > .05$

Notes: \* denotes a  $p$  value found to be significant as defined by the parameters of this study. A list of the exact survey questions can be found in the Appendices.



Table 4

*Workload*

<u>Question</u>	<u>Pre-service</u>	<u>Experienced</u>	<u>P</u>
Time spent planning	8.83	6.57	* $p < .05$
Time spent on extracurriculars/clubs	5.04	3.05	* $p < .05$
Few job requirements outside of the classroom	1.83	3.09	* $p < .05$
Time spent on paperwork	8.17	9.19	* $p < .05$
Total work required	7.26	3.91	* $p < .05$
Total hours spent working	9.00	9.48	$p > .05$
Number of students serviced	6.37	7.52	$p > .05$

Notes: \* denotes a  $p$  value found to be significant as defined by the parameters of this study. A list of the exact survey questions can be found in the Appendices.

Table 5

*Experience*

<u>Question</u>	<u>Pre-service</u>	<u>Experienced</u>	<u>P</u>
Effectiveness of TEP in preparation	8.39	5.66	* $p < .05$

Notes: \* denotes a  $p$  value found to be significant as defined by the parameters of this study. A list of the exact survey questions can be found in the Appendices.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications**

### **Introduction**

The data gleaned from studying attrition factors in pre-service educators made some facets of attrition apparent. First and foremost, the data showed that attrition factors can be detected in pre-service teachers. Pre-service educators have some significant misperceptions about what awaits them when they enter the field of teaching. If these factors are not addressed in TEPs, the misperceptions and unmet expectations that follow could potentially lead to higher attrition rates (Fore et al., 2002; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010; Vanheule et al., 2003; Wasburn-Moses, 2009).

While the basic hypothesis examined in this study is an important one, as it validates the pursuit of exploring attrition prevention further, it is a rather narrow lens. Whether attrition factors can be found in pre-service educators is a “yes” or “no” question that does not provide much additional information. However, the data obtained in this study provide researchers with more options for pursuing specific attrition factors in TEPs and help to validate such research.

### **Interpretations of the Results**

I was not surprised to find that attrition factors could be detected in pre-service educators. However, I was surprised about which areas showed significant differences between the perceptions of pre-service and experienced educators. For instance, compared to the reality described by the experienced educators, the pre-service educators believed they would have access to fewer resources; their administration would not be as responsive to their needs; and they would spend more time planning, helping with clubs, and more time working outside of class. The pre-service educators' responses indicated they were completely prepared to spend a large amount of their time both on the job and outside of school, as well as not be compensated with necessary or helpful

resources. Adding to this conundrum, the pre-service educators also believed that the total amount of work required of them was more reasonable than the experienced educators did.

Although the pre-service educators seemed to be more content with the large amount of work and lack of resources they expected to face, they did have higher expectations when it came to relationships. Compared to the realities reported by the experienced educators, the pre-service educators believed they would spend more time working with administrators and team teaching with other educators. Furthermore, while pre-service educators expected to spend more time planning for their classes, sponsoring clubs, and working outside of school, they also believed they would be doing significantly less paperwork than their counterparts reported was the case. In the literature, paperwork is often the bane of teachers who attrite, not simply because it is added work that is often deemed frivolous but also because it is faceless work that keeps them away from the reason they want to teach — the students (Manuel & Hughes, 2006). The pre-service educators in this study mistakenly believed they would be doing less paperwork than the experienced educators reported was actually required. Moreover, the pre-service educators believed the paperwork that would be required of them would be more reasonable and beneficial than the experienced educators believed was actually the case.

The most surprising result was identifying the categories in which the attrition factors were present in the pre-service educators. At the beginning of the survey, I expected that the pre-service special educators would expect their future job to have a significantly lower workload. I had assumed that the major factor that drove educators to attrition was being overworked and stressed. Thus, it seemed counterintuitive that the pre-service educators would expect to work longer and harder. I had expected the pre-service educators to perceive the workload as much less grueling

than their counterparts — after all, why would anyone be willing to enter a field they expected to be so tedious? It was therefore quite surprising when the data showed that the pre-service educators expected to work not less but much more.

Another potential interpretation of the data is that pre-service educators are actually idealists. According to some studies in this area, many teachers enter the field with the expectation that they will be tools for change and influence (Buchanan, 2009; DeMik, 2008; Liu, 2007; Manuel & Hughes, 2006). Remaining content despite working long hours seems like a reasonable price to pay if one is actually influencing change. So while an initial look at pre-service educators' perceptions of work may make it seem like they are content to overwork themselves, this perception of work more may prove to be a weakness when they experience burn out. While the enthusiasm this perception gives educators going out into the field may be useful, its potential negative effects should be studied and pursued in further research.

### **Potential Applications of the Findings**

The data from this study not only point to the presence of attrition factors in pre-service educators but also help to highlight the areas of attrition that may be of greatest concern. Pre-service educators in TEPs seem to expect their future jobs to be much more grueling and difficult than experienced educators actually reported is the case. In turn, pre-service educators expect to be compensated with good relationships and camaraderie. Pre-service educators are highly motivated and enthusiastic, but they seem to desire affirmation, others who understand them, and peers to come alongside them, even in the case of administrators, who may not be able to respond as desired due to budget cuts, other constraints, or a lack of desire.

The pursuit of this data could be vital for preventing teacher attrition. At the moment, induction programs are gaining momentum, but they are not found in all schools (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). If the major factors of teacher attrition are indeed those that revolve around relationships, having mentor teachers come alongside new teachers and ensuring that school administrations make time to meet with new teachers could be the simplest yet most vital steps in significantly reducing educator attrition rates.

The emphasis pre-service educators place on the relational aspects of their jobs may also explain why teachers report being more heavily influenced by their supervising teacher during student teaching than by any other factor. It may also help to explain why having more experience is one of the most beneficial factors in preventing attrition. Student teachers may consider TEP content like school paperwork to be beneficial, but pre-service educators perceive a greater need and stronger desire for the relationships and collaboration that field experience brings. Even if this is not the case and the issue lies more in the realm of heavy idealism, experience provides a better dose of reality than do textbooks and writing papers.

Finally, it would be beneficial for TEPs to evaluate their students to help future studies create better measures for detecting teacher attrition in TEPs. This study clearly shows that attrition factors can be detected early in an educator's career. Thus, informing specific departments and individual teachers about the potential pitfalls of their future career may be vital to the success and longevity of future educators. Such knowledge would allow good TEPs to cater their classes to the individuals in their program, as they are able to assess the needs of each class separately.

### **Biblical Integrative Component and Implications**

Regardless of whether teachers need affirmation from peers and the community or are idealists who want to produce change, many do not choose to enter the teaching profession for monetary gain. Educators are not flagellants who gain joy from working themselves to death. Rather, many teachers — at least initially — seek to do great good in the world. The field of education is often one of the best avenues for serving others humbly.

The potential implications of this study accentuate what the Bible makes clear — that is, we are social, spiritual beings who have obligations to God and others. While there are many components of this relationship, Micah 6:8 highlights the essentials: God's requirements of man are justice, mercy, and that he walk with God (Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011b). This is true for every human being, despite the fact that many men and women, educators and students, fail to acknowledge God and his moral requirements. Regardless of whether man acknowledges his obligations to God and his fellow man, all humans are made aware of these obligations in their consciences, as all human beings are made in God's likeness.

The Bible tends to speak to obligations and relationships more than it does to education. Although some of the Wisdom Literature speaks to work and effort, little speaks to education itself. Ecclesiastes 12 may hold one of the only passages in the Bible that speaks directly to education. Although Ecclesiastes 12 has a much broader meaning than education alone, I believe the verse describes work, and education in particular, accurately when it says, "Much study wearies the body" (Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011a). When this statement is viewed in light of the broader context of the chapter and the book as a whole, the word "study" falls into the same category as so many other areas of life — that of vanity. Following the pronouncement of the vanity

of excessive study, the author of Ecclesiastes turns the reader's attention back to the obligations of mankind regarding God and his commandments.

This research study highlights what the authors of the Bible realized over 2,000 years ago and what God continues to reveal in the hearts of men today — that is, work for work's sake is vanity. Life without justice and mercy is vanity. The only life that will lead to fulfillment and joy is one centered on service and, ultimately, on the God who is the embodiment of servanthood. While much research remains to be done in the area of teacher attrition, it is reasonable to expect attrition to continue if there is a discrepancy between the expectations of pre-service educators and the realities of what is actually experienced in the field with regard to relationships. If a large number of educators enter the field expecting a low-wage, high-stress job, they must have other motives behind their decisions. Many educators self-report that they wanted to teach because of relationships (Buchanan, 2009; DeMik, 2008; Manuel & Hughes, 2006), but they may end up finding that the field deals more with mundane, faceless work. In the end, many of those who attrite may simply be raising their voices beside the author of Ecclesiastes, crying out “vanity!”

Although some may belittle the notion of the Wisdom Literature speaking to this particular issue, the New Testament paints an even clearer picture of education. The Bible provides little about Christ's formal education, but much of what he does throughout Scripture is to teach others. Although the content of Christ's message was often more spiritual than academic, modern educators can learn many lessons from his methods. Jesus, the mouthpiece of God, the light that entered the darkness to illuminate and make known, was certainly concerned with conveying information accurately, but in the moments in which he was teaching individuals, the picture is usually different.



One story that stands out is the woman at the well. Jesus, a Jew, asks the woman, a Samaritan, to fetch him some water. In this short interaction, we observe Jesus breaking down social barriers, confronting error while offering love, and standing firm while remaining patient when those around him (his disciples) do not understand what he is doing. Christ's ministry and style of teaching revolved around justice, as he sought the lowly and reprimanded those who abused authority; mercy, as he loved those who did wrong and was patient with the failures and slowness of others to understand and comply; and humility, as he condescended to become a man, the perfect image of God, our perfect high priest, and the only image to which we could truly relate.

### **Relation of the Results to the Literature**

Perhaps the most surprising element of this study is the data showing that the pre-service educators' views aligned fairly well with those of their experienced counterparts. While approximately one-third of the questions on the survey showed significance, the majority of the questions were in relative alignment with accurate expectations. When one considers that, of those areas in which the responses of the pre-service and experienced educators did not align, many of the results were the opposite of what one would have expected, that leaves an even smaller portion of attrition factors that stood out. The attrition factors in the field of education have been measured through decades of research, so their absence among pre-service educators on so many questions seems surprising.

Nevertheless, the pre-service educators did show some significant, expected dissonance in several key areas of attrition noted in the literature, namely those areas that were more social in nature. While the literature review did not reveal any distinction between social and non-social

attrition factors, this study seems to show an overarching thread that potentially weaves through the five categories mentioned in the literature.

In retrospect, the literature does provide indications that could have encouraged research to pursue social factors. First, educators often self-identify as entering the field to change lives, work with students, and have an impact on the community (Buchanan, 2009; DeMik, 2008). If an educator's driving force comes from working in and changing lives, it makes sense that such an individual would be hit hardest by being pulled away from those things or feeling undermined by those who should have similar goals.

Second, the literature is clear that induction is the preferred method of dealing with attrition in the field. While induction certainly involves a new teacher learning the menial tasks, such as paperwork and protocol, associated with their position, the key element of induction is having a cooperating teacher, peer, or mentor come alongside the new teacher (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Videos and written directions can be mass-produced and propagated by school systems, but it is induction — a cumbersome and resource-heavy system — that is considered most beneficial for helping schools to curb teacher attrition. When viewed in light of the social, cooperative aspect of teaching that may be the driving force behind teacher attrition, induction makes sense as a decently effective mitigating strategy.

Finally, viewing teacher attrition in light of social factors may help to explain other findings from the literature: (1) why new teachers self-report that their three and a half year college educations pale in influence compared to their six- to 12-week student-teaching experiences with a supervising teacher (Cook, 2007) and (2) why five-year TEPs structured to emphasize experience produce teachers with lower attrition rates (Edgar & Pair, 2005). Though some may argue that

experience in any field is more influential than bookwork or class time, such arguments miss the point of what is actually being stated here. New teachers are not self-reporting that their classroom experience was more influential than their coursework, classmates, or professors; rather, they are reporting that their supervising teacher was the biggest influence. Their classroom experience may be vital to their survival as a teacher, but their perception of preparedness stemmed from an individual, not an endeavor.

It would be going too far to say that the results of this study prove that teacher attrition is mainly caused by social factors. However, the data gleaned from the pre-service and experienced educators indicate that it may be a good place to delve deeper. This suggestion is furthered by the wealth of literature that supports such a hypothesis. Regardless, it is clear that pre-service educators do show signs of dissonance with their experienced counterparts regarding attrition factors. Future studies may find that these early beliefs are unimportant or unalterable at such an early stage, but the current state of research demands that we move away from a saturated area of study to look at areas that may lead to a deeper understanding and prevention of the problematic trend of attrition.

### **Strengths of the Study**

The greatest asset of this study may be that it is founded on decades of research. Teacher attrition has been and continues to be a prominent topic in the field of education, as well as a vital area of study. For researchers, the identifiers of attrition and the tools to test for it are strongly pronounced and widely available in the literature. This study sought to build on the standing research to pursue a new question in the realm of teacher attrition.

Another strength of this study, specificity, is also one of its limitations, though for different reasons. The research for this study was conducted in a very particular region, among a very

particular group of individuals in a particular field of study. While this limits the ability of researchers to apply these findings with surety to a broader group, the findings can be applied with great confidence to the region and related field of study in which the study was conducted. While it is possible that the findings could very well be applied effectively to a broader group, the limited current findings do not support such a course of action at the same high confidence level that is afforded to the particular region and field of study where the research was conducted.

A final strength of this study is its potential applicability to both private and public schools and universities. Although the research here was limited to public institutions, this was done simply to control the sample size and exposure of participants. While this choice means the findings only indicate the climate of perceptions in the respective institutions, it by no means diminishes the ubiquitous propensity of failed expectations to be highly indicative of future attrition. The attrition factors discussed in this study are well known and have been identified through decades of research in various fields of education. Although the existence of attrition factors may not be identical in other public schools or private institutions, this study illustrates how understanding such a possibility can benefit all institutions.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although specificity is one of the major components and strengths of this study, it also creates certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, while the field of special education employs a large number of professionals nationwide, each public school has just a small number of special educators, especially compared to the general-educator population. Due to the limited number of special educators at each location and the distance between the schools needed for a sufficient number of experienced special educators, the experienced educators were selected via a

convenience sampling method. While convenience samples are not necessarily deleterious to the accuracy of results, they limit the confidence with which one can assume a valid conclusion.

Another limitation to the internal validity of the study arose from its structure. Since I compared pre-service educators with experienced educators, one could question whether experienced educators are too far removed from their own TEP to provide meaningful data. While it is true that some of the respondents were very far removed from their TEP experience, the goal of the study was to compare expectations with reality, and the experienced educators were able to provide valid assessments of the reality of their current situation, regardless of the amount of time that had passed since they were in a TEP. While this time-lag criticism is a valid concern that should influence future research, I do not believe this limiting factor voids the validity of the current study, which is a first step in completing the larger picture of the connection between attrition and TEPs.

Finally, this study did not control for the background education of the experienced educators. All of the experienced educators were pooled from a public school, but I did not collect data on which colleges and universities they attended. I do not believe this is a significant limitation. I chose to use experienced educators in this study instead of teachers fresh out of a TEP to ensure that the educators were sufficiently saturated in the teaching field. This would ensure that their perceptions were based more on experience and the way things truly are than on the remnants of unfounded expectations that lingered from their TEP. Thus, their background education was less of a concern, as I hoped that the perceptions they reported would be based on their current situation and not on their past education. Nevertheless, future researchers who desire more specificity and have access to a larger sample size may wish to counter this limitation in their research.

In addition to these limitations to internal validity, I must also acknowledge one major limitation to the external validity of the study. I have mentioned several times throughout this section that one of the key features of this study was its size. While using a small, targeted population does strengthen my conclusions in some regards, it also weakens the generalizability of the study to larger, distant populations. The characteristics of special educators and the reasons why they are drawn to their field may generalize to most regions, but one cannot conclude as much based on this study alone. It is quite possible that the findings of this study may be applicable to larger regions, other educational fields, and even other professions, but further research on a larger scale is needed to support such a conclusion. Due to the high specificity of the study's participants, the study's external validity is limited in how confidently the findings could be extended beyond the scope of special educators and special-education TEPs in public institutions in the southeastern United States.

Beyond the limitations to the internal and external validity of the study, there were also some potential limitations on the effect size. As with many of the other limitations presented in this section, the effect-size limitations are largely due to the specificity of the study. The first limitation on the effect size is a result of the small sample size. The criteria required of participants — that they be pre-service special educators attending a public university who had been accepted into the university's education program but had not begun their student-teaching experience — meant the potential sample size for this small region was also small. Although the sample size limits the study's applicability and generalizability to larger regions, since the study focused on a small region, the sample size strengthened the confidence of the findings for local applicability. Thus, this

study provides a model for future studies to extend the research, as well as information to pique the interest of future researchers dealing with teacher attrition.

A further limitation on the effect size came from the tests used to analyze the data, which were chosen to compensate for issues accompanying the small sample size. Because of the sample size, I was required to analyze the data using tests that hold to an unequal variance. This is not inherently problematic, but it does reduce the confidence level of the findings, as tests conducted under the assumption of equal variance generally produce greater confidence. Unfortunately, such tests were not feasible with the current dataset. However, the confidence garnered from most of the areas identified as statistically significant tended to be extremely significant, beyond the normal .05 alpha threshold accepted by most research as significant, so I do not think this limitation was a big concern in the present study.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Several avenues for future research have arisen in light of this research study. Based on the findings of this study, I recommend further research in the following areas: studies seeking to expand the sample size, region, and education field; studies focusing on the link between attrition and TEPs; research looking at the question of specialization in the special-education community; research exploring the effect of a “calling” on those who enter the field of education; and studies pursuing further the attrition factors identified in this study. The reason for the first suggestion is clear after a glance at the acknowledged limitations of this research. Much confidence is lost when extending the conclusions of this study beyond the small region and population in which it was conducted. It would behoove future researchers interested in this hypothesis to extend the research to larger regions and sample sizes. Moreover, researchers should also consider extending the scope

of the fields studied. Although this particular study focused on special-educator attrition, which is more pronounced than general-educator attrition, rates of attrition among general educators continue to be high as well. Studying special education may highlight key issues on which to focus, but research should not stop there. This topic has a high potential to aid the field of education as a whole in terms of best-practice implementation at both the college and career levels and should be pursued fully.

The second suggestion for future research is to pursue research regarding the link between attrition and TEPs. The literature review conducted for this study showed that educational-attrition research extends back to at least 1956, grew in popularity in the mid-1900s, and has become more pronounced over time. Educational research is saturated with studies acknowledging and decrying teacher attrition, much of it useful in understanding *why* teachers attrite, but the issue at hand is no longer why teachers attrite but *when* attrition factors can be detected and *how* they can be obviated.

The goal of this study is not to place the responsibility for preventing and curing high rates of attrition on any one institution. Rather, I hope it will encourage future researchers to place less of an emphasis on a supersaturated issue and pursue routes that use well-documented facts to expand the research. Current research seems to focus more on extending the regions and sample sizes of a conclusion that has been well tested and documented for over 50 years. While it is important to keep tracking rates and reasons for attrition, it is vital that researchers move beyond this post facto approach to attrition.

Third, future research should begin to delve into the question of specialization in the special-education community. Many states have various levels of special educators or special educators who tack on extra certifications that funnel them into working with a particular type of



individual. It is currently unknown whether working with a particular group or in a particular setting within special education lends itself more to teacher attrition. The literature survey in this study revealed little regarding specific groups within special education.

Fourth, if the implications of the importance of relationship building are true, future research should explore the effect of a “calling” on those who enter the field of education. While the Bible calls all of us to love and serve others, in the field of education, this is especially true. Many other fields revolve around performing tasks or creating products, but education at its core revolves around relationships with others. Servanthood is a prime directive for all Christians, and as a result, those who feel called to serve may either learn to persevere through frustrating situations to stick with their calling or be more likely to attrite to another field if they feel they can be better used there. Investigating the effect of a “call” on individuals’ career paths would be an interesting follow-up to this study.

Finally, I suggest that future research be conducted to confirm the findings of this study in the study region and beyond. The findings of this study seem somewhat counterintuitive. For instance, a heavy workload is generally indicative of high teacher attrition rates, yet the pre-service educators in this study expected a significantly higher workload than their experienced counterparts reported was realistic. The question looms regarding whether this is unrealistic, youthful fervor on the part of the pre-service educators, or whether they are simply prepared to give of themselves significantly. At the same time, collaboration was the only other area of significant difference besides experience. Pre-service educators seemed to think their role would include more teamwork among the administration and other educators. Thus, this study may indicate that, prior to entering the field, educators are willing to put in the work and deal with problems in various areas, provided

they feel as though they are working on a team and collaborating with their peers and administration. It would be interesting to see whether the data collected in this research is indicative of other regions or across the education profession and higher-education institutions as a whole.

This study does not conclusively show that educators fresh out of a TEP are truly willing to deal with strenuous amounts of work, nor does it show that addressing the dissonance between expected and actual collaboration would significantly affect the rate of teacher attrition. However, the questions it raises provide a fresh focus for research on teacher attrition, and the data gleaned help to provide focused avenues for future researchers to pursue. Due to the significant amount of research showing that dissonance in expectations is a key component of attrition (Fore et al., 2002; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010; Vanheule et al., 2003; Wasburn-Moses, 2009), looking at pre-service educators' dissonant perceptions seems like a perfect place to start.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Experienced Educator Survey

**Instructions:** Please answer all of the following questions to the best of your ability.

1. Teaching Position \_\_\_\_\_
2. Number of Years Teaching \_\_\_\_\_

On a scale of 1 (little) to 10 (much), how much time do you typically spend working on the following, during or after school hours?

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 3. ____ Teaching Reading and Writing  | 10. ____ Working with General Educators |
| 4. ____ Teaching Core Content   | 11. ____ Planning                       |
| 5. ____ Teaching study skills   | 12. ____ Extracurricular/Club Sponsor   |
| 6. ____ Working with Parents  | 13. ____ IEP or Other Meetings          |
| 7. ____ Working with Administrators   | 14. ____ Team Teaching                  |
| 8. ____ Paperwork   | 15. ____ Total Hours Working            |
| 9. ____ Consulting with Caseload  |   |
| 16. On a scale of 1 (few) to 10 (many), how many students do you expect to service each week: _____ |   |

On a scale of 1 (Extremely Poor) to 10 (Extremely Well), please rate how well the following statements describe your experiences as a special educator.

17. \_\_\_\_ The administration upholds and supports teacher decisions in the classroom.
18. \_\_\_\_ Fellow special education staff will be eager to help and collaborate with you.
19. \_\_\_\_ Fellow general education staff will be eager to help and collaborate with you.
20. \_\_\_\_ Your school will provide the resources necessary to be an effective teacher.
21. \_\_\_\_ The general public understands your daily responsibilities and roles as a special educator.
22. \_\_\_\_ The general public values and respects those in the special education field.
23. \_\_\_\_ The parents uphold and support teacher decisions in the classroom.
24. \_\_\_\_ Students demonstrate appropriate respect in the classroom.
25. \_\_\_\_ Students take pride in their work and put forth appropriate effort in their tasks.
26. \_\_\_\_ Students will show marked improvement throughout the year.
27. \_\_\_\_ Except grading and lesson plans, your position holds no substantial requirements outside classroom time.
28. \_\_\_\_ The administration is available and responsive to your concerns.
29. \_\_\_\_ The required amount of paperwork is reasonable and beneficial to education.
30. \_\_\_\_ The amount of total work required of you is reasonable.
31. \_\_\_\_ The administration regularly conveys appreciation and encouragement for your role as an educator.
32. \_\_\_\_ Because of your experience in the special education program, you will be adequately prepared to handle your future position.

## Appendix B: Pre-Service Educator Survey

**Instructions:** Please answer all of the following questions to the best of your ability.

1. College major:

\_\_\_\_\_

2. College Year (i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> semester junior):

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Have you been accepted into the special education department:      yes      no

4. Have you begun your final student teaching experience:              yes      no

On a scale of 1 (little) to 10 (much), how much time do you expect to spend working on the following, during or after school hours, once you obtain a full time teaching position:

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 5. ____ Teaching Reading and Writing | 12. ____ Working with General Educators |
| 6. ____ Teaching Core Content        | 13. ____ Planning                       |
| 7. ____ Teaching study skills        | 14. ____ Extracurricular/Club Sponsor   |
| 8. ____ Working with Parents         | 15. ____ IEP or Other Meetings          |
| 9. ____ Working with Administrators  | 16. ____ Team Teaching                  |
| 10. ____ Paperwork                   | 17. ____ Total Hours Working            |
| 11. ____ Consulting with Caseload    |   |

18. On a scale of 1 (few) to 10 (many), how many students do you expect to service each week:

\_\_\_\_\_

On a scale of 1 (Completely Unrealistic) to 10 (Completely Realistic), please rate how realistically you believe the following statements describe your future position.

19. \_\_\_\_ The administration upholds and supports teacher decisions in the classroom.
20. \_\_\_\_ Fellow special education staff will be eager to help and collaborate with you.
21. \_\_\_\_ Fellow general education staff will be eager to help and collaborate with you.
22. \_\_\_\_ Your school will provide the resources necessary to be an effective teacher.
23. \_\_\_\_ The general public understands your daily responsibilities and roles as a special educator.
24. \_\_\_\_ The general public values and respects those in the special education field.
25. \_\_\_\_ The parents uphold and support teacher decisions in the classroom.
26. \_\_\_\_ Students demonstrate appropriate respect in the classroom.
27. \_\_\_\_ Students take pride in their work and put forth appropriate effort in their tasks.
28. \_\_\_\_ Students will show marked improvement throughout the year.
29. \_\_\_\_ Except grading and lesson plans, your position holds no substantial requirements outside classroom time.
30. \_\_\_\_ The administration is available and responsive to your concerns.

31. \_\_\_\_ The required amount of paperwork is reasonable and beneficial to education.
32. \_\_\_\_ The amount of total work required of you is reasonable.
33. \_\_\_\_ The administration regularly conveys appreciation and encouragement for your role as an educator.
34. \_\_\_\_ Because of your experience in the special education program, you will be adequately prepared to handle your future position.



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