

**FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE
RETENTION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION
TEACHERS IN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA**

LIU CHING SUNG

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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE RETENTION OF SPECIAL
EDUCATION TEACHERS IN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that will enhance the retention of Special Education teachers employed in private Special Needs centres in the Greater Kuala Lumpur region of Malaysia. This phenomenological study uses the one-to-one face-to-face semi-structured interviews in order to explore the participants lived experiences of the 10 ($n=10$) criterion-based participants who has a minimum of two years continuous work experience as Special Education teachers. The participants consist of three male and seven female Special Education teachers. The theoretical framework used in this study is a combination of the Transactional theory of Stress and Coping, the Self-Regulating theory, the Self-Determining theory of Motivation, and the General Adaptation Syndrome. The field work started after the research question was tested through a pilot. The research questions were designed to explore the feelings of the Special Education teachers in their classrooms, followed by an inquiry into their motivations and their coping strategies, both in and outside their challenging work condition in order to enhance their job retention. The participants reported more negative than positive feelings and were more intrinsically motivated. The participants reported that they used more emotion-focused coping strategies in their classrooms, however, they used more dysfunctional coping strategies to unwind outside work. The data was transcribed in verbatim with accompanying notes on paralinguistics and categorized in accordance to the theoretical framework of positive and negative feelings, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and emotion-focused, problem-focused, and dysfunctional coping strategies. The data is then analysed and categorized under themes and sub-themes according to their different theories. It must be noted that the data collection process was limited due to the national lockdown in order to curtail the spread of Covid-19 pandemic and this in turn also limited the number of participants as well as the fact that six out the 10 interviews were carried out in a café instead of their respective Special Needs centres. This study also contained recommendations for current Special Education teachers so that the findings will help them to equip themselves with a wider repertoire of coping techniques. As for private Institutes of Higher Learning, the findings recommended that it would be for their benefit to implement psychometric tests, conduct further education, and to make the syllabus more practical with internship programs and consultation with private Special Needs centres. It is also recommended that private Special Needs centres need to strike a balance between the well-being of their staff and their bottom-line as well as to cultivate a healthy work culture in order to enhance the retention of their employees. Future research could use this study as a springboard through uncoupling the research questions to obtain more in-depth and richer data by using quantitative or mixed-method approaches. This study could also be replicated by other researchers to conduct study on Special Education teachers in government centres in order to compare their lived experiences with their private counterparts.

Keywords: Special education teachers, private special needs centres, coping, and motivation

APPROVAL

This is to certify that this thesis conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The student has been supervised by: **Professor Dr. Juhary Ali**

The thesis has been examined and endorsed by:

Professor Dr. Mohamad Hanapi Bin Mohamad
UniKL
Examiner 1

Professor Dr. Goi Chai Lee
Curtin University, Sarawak
Examiner 2

Professor Dato' Dr. Salina Binti Daud
Universiti Tenaga Nasional
Examiner 3

This thesis was submitted to Asia e University and is accepted as fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



Professor Dr Siow Heng Loke
Asia e University
Chairman, Examination Committee
(26 June 2023)

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the PhD degree is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and/or exclusion from the award of the degree.

Name: Liu Ching Sung

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Liu Ching Sung', written in a cursive style with a large loop at the bottom.

Signature of Candidate:

Date: 26 June 2023

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

ABA	Applied Behavioral Analysis
ACA	The American Counselling Association
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
ASEAN	The Association of South East Asian Nations
BA	Behavior Activation
BMI	Body Mass Index
CAE	The College of Allied Educators
CATs	Creative Arts Therapies
CBT	Cognitive Behavioral therapy
CMCO	Conditional Movement Control Order
COPE	Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced
CRC	The Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPWD	The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CWD	Children with Disabilities
DNA	Deoxyribo-Nucleic Acid
EEG	Electro-Encephalo-Graph
EI	Emotional Intelligence
EQ	Emotional Quotient
GAS	General Adaptation Syndrome
HPA	The Hypothalamus-Pituitary-Adrenal
HR	Human Resource
HSC	The Higher School Certificate

IIUM	The International Islamic University Malaysia
IHL	Institutes of Higher Learning
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
JKM	Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat
LED	Light-Emitting Diode
MBSR	Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction
MCE	The Malaysian Certificate of Education
MCO	Movement Control Order
MOE	The Ministry of Education
MQA	The Malaysian Qualification Agency
NASOM	The National Autism Society Association of Malaysia
NGOs	Non-Government Organizations
NREM	Non-Rapid Eye Movements
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
REBT	Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy
RMCO	Recovery Movement Control Order
REM	Rapid Eye Movement
SAM	Sympathoadrenal-medullary
SCN	The Supra Chiasmatic Nucleus
SEAMEOSEN	The South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization Special Education Needs
SEM	Slow Eye Movement
SEN	Special Education Needs
SOP	Standard Operation Procedures
SES	Socio-Economic Status

SPS	The Sensory-Processing Sensitivity Scale
SWS	Slow Wave Sleep
TM	Transcendental Meditation
TV	Television
UiTM	University Teknologi MARA
UKM	University Kebangsaan Malaysia
UM	University Malaya
UN	The United Nations
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNPWD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UPSI	University Pendidikan Sultan Idris
USM	University Sains Malaysia
UTAR	University Tengku Abdul Rahman
WHO	The World Health Organization

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

“Oh no! Not another resignation.” This is commonly expressed among many employers. Worse still, the resignation of any staff member will inevitably dampen the morale of the remaining staff members as well as compromising the delivery of services to the existing clientele. The obvious response from management is to advertise in order to fill in the vacancies. This recruitment exercise is not only expensive but frustrating as applications are few in numbers, even then most of them lacked the required certification or experience to be immediately productive on-the-job. The above phenomenon is not sporadic but it has become more and more common among privately operate Special Needs centres. This phenomenon demands that something must be done in order to address this chronic and upward trending phenomenon.

1.2 Background of the study

All occupations have both pleasant and unpleasant experiences, but not all jobs are equal. Some jobs have more unpleasant experiences with their accompanying negative feelings than others. This unpleasant experience and its associated negative feelings are particularly more noticeable among occupations that involve people-to-people interactions (Clipa, 2018, Danilewitz, 2017, Hartley, 2016). The teaching profession is no exception. Studies have categorized that it has its fair share of unpleasant experiences and negative feelings. Some studies were more direct by describing the negative feelings as higher than-normal stress (Ryan et al., 2017) comparable to professionals engaged in the fields of medicine, law, and aviation (Jacobson, 2016).

To make matters worse, this unpleasant experience and negative emotions experienced by Special Education teachers are further exacerbated by two additional factors, the demands of the profession (Alhija, 2014) and for being held accountable for things which are outside one's control (Jacobson, 2016). Several studies have reported that the job scope of a Special Education teacher is difficult, demanding, and stressful (Edward et al., 2018) as Special Education teachers are also held accountable for the progress and behaviour of their students, in other words, they must take responsibility in the way they execute their teaching processes as well as the results of their Special Needs students (Machingambi et al., 2013). As though the classroom stress is insufficient, the stress level experienced by Special Education teachers is further exacerbated by the fact that they must engage in extra research, create extra resources, and spend extra time in achieving learning outcomes in comparison to regular teachers (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Studies have shown that Special Education teachers were about 2.5 times more likely to transfer to general teaching or to leave the teaching profession entirely. The turnover rates had been trending upwards from around 18.8 percent in 1992 to 21.4 percent in 1995 and to 27.7 percent in 2002 (Compton, 2019). Another study revealed that most Special Education teachers leave their profession within their first five years of service (Talley, 2016). The dearth of Special Education teachers has now become a national phenomenon as 98 percent of school districts in the United States of America experience this shortfall (Beebe, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017) and the Council for Exceptional Children in 2011 reported that there were 12,000 vacancies for Special Education teaching positions at the time of the study (Compton, 2019). Recruitment of candidates into this profession also proved futile due to the significant fall in applicants interested in this vocation (Martin, 2016; Zost, 2010). This leakage is also costly to the American Education system. A study from the

Alliance for Excellent Education in 2015 reported that it cost the United States of America a minimum of US 2.2 billion dollars annually (Beebe, 2017).

One can always dismiss the above findings as an American phenomenon. How about the situation in Malaysia? A survey conducted on the effects of negative feelings such as emotional stress among Special Education teachers in the Baling district of Kedah reported the following statistics. It revealed that 65 percent of the respondents' experienced moderate levels of emotional stress, 20 percent owned up to a high level of emotional stress and the remaining 15 percent reported a low level of emotional stress. No explanation was given to clarify the lower-than-expected level of emotional stress even though most of them confessed that they were already harbouring negative emotions as a result of their prolonged unpleasant experiences in schools. Besides suffering alone and in silence, many of them had expressed a need for counselling services in order to mitigate their negative emotions (Haznurah & Mohd Zuri, 2012). The fact that many of the respondents recognized a need for psychological intervention resulting from teaching children with Learning disabilities indicated an urgent need to find some effective and practical solutions.

It must be noted that the study by Haznurah and Mohd Zuri (2012) was conducted on Special Education teachers from government schools and not from private Special Needs centres. Nevertheless, regardless whether these Special Education teachers were from the public or private sectors, both face similar work situations largely due to the genre of students they handle. Despite their similarities, it must be noted that Special Education teachers employed in government institutions are somewhat different from their private sector counterparts. For a start, most if not all Special Education teachers employed in the public sector are recruited from public Institutions of Higher Learning (Bari et. al., 2002). This difference suggests that most

of them have been adequately trained in Special Education with internship placements and have gone through a battery of psychometric tests and career counselling in order to prepare them for the job ahead. Furthermore, being government servants, they are also enticed to remain on-the-job due to guaranteed salary increments, bonuses, promotions, paid seminars and workshops, medical and hospital benefits, and pensions. These contrast with most Special Education teachers employed in the private sector as they are mainly recruited from private Institutions of Higher Learning. This would suggest that they were not sufficiently trained in Special Education but in general degrees such as psychology, education, and social science. Even if they had some exposure to Special Needs such as in Abnormal Psychology, they are basic, rudimentary, theoretical and reductionist in content, worse still these general courses do not have specific internship placements with Special Needs centres or psychometric tests to screen their suitability for their arduous tasks ahead. Such inadequacies could be translated on-the-ground as heightened anxiety, stress, and frustration (Hunnur, Vyas, Sudarshan, Mathad & Pareek, 2013), inability to suppress their desire to vent their negative feelings or turn to substance abuse (Mukosolu et al., 2015). This could also be due to a lack of coping resources, only to succumb to the scourge of presentism and absenteeism (Ryan et al., 2017) to the detriment of their Special Needs students. On a personal note, these Special Education teachers may come to a stage of burnout (Reed, 2016), resulting in a lack of belief in their own self-efficacy (Hardwick, 2017; Lombardo-Graves, 2017) and a diminished sense of personal well-being (Gustems-Carnicer, Calderon, Batalla-Flores & Esteban-Bara, 2019), and may result in their continuous exploration of other less demanding options.

The unpleasant work environment faced by Special Education teachers was only one factor that impinged their retention and longevity in their jobs. The obvious

remedy to fill the vacancies was to improve the working condition and to increase recruitment. The former is more easily said than done due to the ever-changing demands placed by policy makers with little or no empathy for those on the ground. The attempt to attract more candidates into this profession also hit a snag as studies have revealed a drop of applicants interested to be trained as Special Education teachers (Arthur-Ofei, 2018; Kagler, 2011). As though increasing the pool of Special Education teachers and encouraging them to stay was not difficult enough, the situation was worsened through an exponential increase in the demands for Special Education teachers.

1.3 Objectives

The bottom line of most business or operations is profitability or at least a semblance of sustainability. This goal is not exclusive to large corporations only as many small sized operations such as Special Needs centers do share the same goals. In order to achieve sustainability, growth, and profitability, entrepreneurs must find strategies to increase their revenues and to minimize their fixed and variable costs (Adoukonou, 2019). This business model appeared basic and rudimentary; however, its implementation could prove frustrating as human resource is the key element in small enterprises involved in people-based business (Barber & Strack, 2005). As seen from numerous studies on Special Education teachers, employers were still being hampered by their inability to maintain staffing members (Beebe, 2017; Ryan, et al., 2017; Talley, 2016), let alone increasing their numbers (Arthur-Ofei, 2018; Kagler, 2011). Numerous studies have been carried out in order to address this pandemic situation (Arthur-Ofei, 2018; Billingsley, 2004; Cullen, 2018) even though some factors for the leakages were identified. Such factors included the work environment (Arthur-Ofei,

2018; Castro, 2017; Cullen, 2018; Hawks, 2016; Newton, 2018) the expected multiple roles (Billingsley, 2004; Gregory, 2014; Platt & Olson, 2016; Rauschenfels, 2000) and students' characteristics (Billingsley, 2004; Gomba, 2015; Gregory, 2014; Hawks, 2016; Hogan, 2012) that Special Education teachers face daily in their work place (Billingsley, 2004). It seems that despite the myriads of research on this phenomenon, the findings did little to stem the outflow, let alone to reverse the attrition of teachers from the already depleting Special Education system. Something must be done in order to improve the retention of Special Education teachers.

The question is, "Not another study on this phenomenon?" It must be noted that most of these researches were conducted within Government schools' settings. Little or no research on was carried out in the private Special Needs centres, perhaps because most Special Education teachers worked within the government school system. Furthermore, the studies were conducted in the more developed Western society (Arthur-Ofei, 2018; Billingsley, 2004; Cullen, 2018) and its relevance to the Malaysian scenario is questionable due to the apparent cultural differences. The studies were mainly quantitative in nature, involving a large sample base using rigid survey questions (Compton, 2019; Gregory, 2014). It must be noted that Special Education teachers were given very limited opportunities to frame issues from their personal perspectives. As revealed by Billingsley (2004), past studies were more interested in addressing the shortage of Special Education teachers through two areas of investigations. The first was through discovering methods for attracting new teachers and the second was to obtain information on their reasons for attrition. It appeared that little was done to explore their reasons for retention. As succinctly said by Billingsley (2004):

Future studies should address teachers' perspectives, observations of their work lives, and revelations in teacher journals, to provide a better understanding of important contributors to job satisfaction, commitment, stress, and career decisions. Moreover, an in-depth analysis of stayers would provide a better understanding of why some special educators remain involved and committed to working with students with disabilities for many years.

(Billingsley, 2004, p. 52)

The researcher opines that if the abovesaid challenges could be addressed, it would bring about some degree of stability in the development of Special Education in the private sector which complements the public sector's effort to serve the special needs of this marginalized but growing market.

1.4 Objective of the study

The objective of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the factors contributing to the retention of Special Education teachers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1.5 Research questions

There were basically three research questions in this study in order to explore the phenomenon more intensively from the lived experiences of Special Education teachers employed in private Special Needs centres within the greater Kuala Lumpur region of Malaysia:

- i) What feelings do Special Education teachers working in private Special Needs centres experience when handling Special Needs children?
- ii) What motivated Special Education teachers working in private Special Needs centres to remain in their current jobs?

- iii) What do Special Education teachers working in private Special Needs centres do in order to cope with the nature of their jobs?

1.6 Scope

Past studies have reported the various factors that were responsible in promoting the retention of Special Education in general. Studies conducted on work factors included administrative support (Arthur-Ofei, 2018; Beebe, 2017; Billingsley, Warger, Littrell & Tomchin, 1993; Bohannan, 2018; Cullen, 2018; Elitharp, 2005; Gregory, 2014; Henderson, 2014; Hogan, 2012; Lawrence, 2017; Martin, 2016; Muturia, 2007; Rauschenfels, 2000; Zost, 2010;), peer support (Gregory, 2014; Henderson, 2014; Hogan, 2012; Lawrence, 2017; Martin, 2016; Muturia, 2007; Rauschenfels, 2000; Zost, 2010), mentoring programmes for novice teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Bohannan, 2018; Cullen, 2018; Gregory, 2014; Henderson, 2014; Hogan, 2012; Muturia, 2007; Smith, 2018; Talley, 2016;), parental support (Arthur-Ofei, 2018; Martin, 2016; Muturia, 2007; Rauschenfels, 2000;), students-teacher relationship (Bohannan, 2018; Cullen, 2018; Hogan, 2012; Martin, 2016;), positive work conditions (Billingsley, 2004; Bohannan, 2018; Cullen, 2018; Elitharp, 2005; Gregory, 2014; Henderson, 2014; Hogan, 2012), specific Special Education teachers' role design (Billingsley, 2004; Elitharp, 2005; Gregory, 2014; Muturia, 2007), work autonomy (Rauschenfels, 2000; Smith, 2018), Special Education teachers' qualification (Bohannan, 2018; Bohannan, 2018; Smith, 2018), upskilling opportunities (Arthur-Ofei, 2018; Billingsley, 2004; Cullen, 2018; Elitharp, 2005; Gregory, 2014; Henderson, 2014; Hogan, 2012; Zost, 2010), adequate remuneration (Cullen, 2018; Gregory, 2014; Henderson, 2014; Lawrence, 2017;), and recognition (Gregory, 2014). Despite the above list of pertinent factors relating to the enhancement of the factors contributing to the retention of Special Education teachers, this study will focus not on Special

Education teachers in general as the above studies have reported but on Special Education teachers working in private Special Needs centres in the Greater Kuala Lumpur region of Malaysia. This study will only focus on four relevant factors in this context which includes the feelings, the motivation, the on-the-job or on-site coping strategies, and the off-site or unwinding strategies of the participants. The third limitation is that this study will only focus on self-initiated coping strategies and not on company-initiated programs.

1.7 Significance of the study

Besides adding to the existing body of research, the findings from this phenomenological study will be useful for a cross-section of people involved in Special Education, more so towards the stakeholders involved in private Special Education within the greater Kuala Lumpur region of Malaysia. Firstly, the current corps of Special Education teachers employed in private Special Needs centres within the greater Kuala Lumpur region of Malaysia would feel better after realizing that their feelings were not unique. Furthermore, it will provide a platform for these Special Education teachers to voice their personal opinions and feelings, hence giving them the right to be heard and to reinforce their sense of importance. Moreover, they could even be encouraged to try out some of the coping techniques provided by their peers in order to expand their personal array of coping techniques. It must be noted that those who chose to stay on in their job must have found some reasons to remain despite their lack of psychometric testing to gauge their suitability, their lack of specialized training, the lack of job security, and their prospect of career advancement and these contributing factors may be due to their sense of altruism and job-efficacy. The findings will also provide relevant information to assist curriculum developers and Institutes of Higher Learning in order to prepare more relevant Special Education