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Evidence-based Practices

Strategies Supporting the Retention of Special Education Teachers of Color Serving Students with Extensive Support Needs



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Teacher turnover is a pressing concern in special education (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), including the turnover of special education teachers (SETs) of color who serve students with extensive support needs (i.e., intellectual disability, developmental delay, and autism; Layden et al., 2022). High turnover makes it harder for schools to provide consistent, targeted support for these students, including students of color with disabilities. Turnover disrupts the continuity of care and relationship between SETs and students. This leaves limited time for new staff to build relationships and understand the diverse needs of students, which may delay progress. Gaps in services from turnover further affect the quality of education these students receive, impeding their academic and emotional growth.

SETs serving students with extensive support needs possess specialized skills, such as understanding neurological and developmental disorders and using evidence-based instructional interventions like assistive technology, life skills training, and communication support that is crucial for this student group. Specialized instructional adaptations are essential to meet each student's unique needs. For example, lessons must be tailored and differentiated to ensure accessibility, which requires careful planning and specialized knowledge of curricula. In addition, students with extensive support needs thrive on consistency. Therefore, turnover can lead to heightened anxiety and behavioral issues, which can hinder their progress.

Research by Layden et al. (2022) and Scott et al. (2024) highlighted factors such as job satisfaction, administrative backing, and collegial and paraprofessional support to reduce the turnover of SETs serving students with extensive support

needs. These findings suggested that without this crucial support, many SETs serving students with extensive support needs may voluntarily leave the profession, causing disruption in students' continuum of services. Their findings also highlighted differences in turnover between SETs serving students with extensive support needs, based on each SET's race and ethnicity. Specifically, the researchers found that SETs of color serving students with extensive support needs were 35.7% more likely to intend to leave the profession compared to their white colleagues, setting the stage for better understanding the degree of support needs based on each SET's race and ethnicity.

SETs of Color Serving Students with Extensive Support Needs

Researchers have found that the presence of same race teachers has positive implications for student of color achievement (Egalite et al., 2015; Redding, 2019) and discipline outcomes (Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Redding, 2019). Findings have also revealed that SETs of color are motivated to stay in the profession to foster diversity and improve academic and adult outcomes for students with disabilities, including students of color with disabilities (Scott et al., 2021). However, SETs of color report contending with additional layers of burdens in schools when compared to their white colleagues, including facing racial microaggressions and isolation in school spaces that do not reflect their racial and ethnic composition (Scott et al., 2021). Despite these barriers, their contributions are essential to the academic success of all students, including students of color with extensive support needs. For students with extensive support needs,

teachers who reflect their cultural backgrounds can be transformative, offering personalized, inclusive, and culturally responsive learning experiences.

While SETs serving students with extensive support needs broadly leave the field for similar reasons of white SETs described earlier in this article, SETs of color face additional challenges that require targeted supports and practices to retain these teachers. SETs of color report feeling a lack of belonging within their schools and report feeling more valued for providing culturally relevant support to students than for their intellectual contributions (Cormier et al., 2022). This devaluing of SETs of color strengths may also contribute to their turnover (Scott, 2020) and requires an ongoing system of support designed to reduce the racialized burden on these teachers, who, as noted previously, are value added educators dedicated to serving the needs of students with extensive support needs.

Retaining SETs for Extensive Support Needs

In the previous section, we described the importance of a diverse SET workforce to serve the unique needs of students with extensive support needs. We explained why it is critically important that the field focuses on retaining these teachers. Moving forward, we offer actionable strategies grounded in research as retention strategies for SETs of color serving students with extensive support needs. Researchers have consistently recognized the need to offer a collection of social, cultural, and mental health supports as well as equity focused professional learning, compensation, and targeted support programs for both teachers of color and SETs (e.g., Ellis-Robinson et al., 2024; Layden et al., 2022; McGrew et al., 2023; Scott & Alexander, 2019; Scott et al., 2024; Scott & Proffitt, 2021). Table 1 details many of these strategies and examples in which schools could implement immediately.

Table 1. Strategies to Retain Teachers Serving Students with Extensive Support Needs

Strategy	Examples
Collective Social Assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create space for relationship-building across diverse groups in schools. • Develop affinity groups based on common interests and create a “safe” space for special educators serving students with extensive support needs.
Culturally Responsive Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure curricula includes instructional materials and resources from racially diverse authors. • Respect and incorporate customs, heritages, and traditions of people of color.
Reduce the Racialized Burden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure all teachers in schools are trained to apply culturally responsive pedagogy, practice, and classroom management for all students, including students of color with disabilities, so this burden does not inequitably fall on the shoulders of SETs of color. • Implement training to address bias in school culture, policy, and practice.
Culturally Responsive Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design professional learning opportunities tailored to the specific needs of teachers serving students with extensive support needs. • Ensure all school staff have access to professional learning opportunities including teachers serving students with extensive support needs.
Hire Other Teachers of Color	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit and retain additional teachers of color, including paraeducators, to support students with extensive support needs. This could include developing pathway programs that target teachers of color, offering financial incentives, and creating partnerships with Minority Serving Institutions, amongst other strategies. • Foster a diverse team to prevent isolation of SETs of color.
Mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop mentoring programs for SETs of color serving students with extensive support needs. • Continually evaluate these programs to ensure effectiveness and responsiveness to needs.
Equity-focused Admin Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leaders should embrace school-wide social justice values. • School leaders should receive training on ways to best support the unique needs of teachers serving students with extensive support needs.
Culture Climate Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use job satisfaction surveys and cultural climate surveys to evaluate racial discrimination and burnout. • Evaluate the well-being of teachers serving students with extensive support needs.
Equity in Compensation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine pay scales to ensure competitive compensation for teachers serving students with extensive support needs. • Increase financial support opportunities for these teachers.

Conclusion

While not exhaustive, we argue that schools can easily adopt one or more of these strategies to better understand the unique needs of SETs of color serving students with extensive support needs and ultimately create positive school culture with the types of norms, values, and integrity grounded in diversity and inclusion that will support the retention of these teachers. It is critical to the success of addressing the turnover of SETs of color serving students with extensive support needs that schools take seriously the call of action to support these educators. Doing so will result in a well-prepared and diverse group of teachers ready and willing to serve our most vulnerable students in schools. ■

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