

Staying the Course: Factors Influencing Retention of Early Childhood Special Educators

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Abstract

This study explored the factors that contribute to the retention of Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) teachers, a profession with historically high attrition rates. Participants included nine ECSE teachers, from two states (Minnesota and Louisiana), representing a range of years of experience (9-29 years). Using a qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted and thematically analyzed to capture teachers' perspectives on what sustains them in the field. Six interrelated themes emerged: strong collegial and administrative support, a deep sense of passion and purpose, the importance of maintaining work-life balance, professional autonomy and creativity, motivation derived from student progress, and opportunities for ongoing professional development. While participants acknowledged systemic challenges, they consistently emphasized intrinsic motivation and supportive professional communities as key to their long-term career satisfaction. The findings suggest that retention efforts in ECSE should focus not only on structural reforms but also on cultivating conditions that strengthen resilience, professional identity, and opportunities for growth. These insights offer guidance for preparation programs, school leaders, and policymakers seeking to improve retention in this critical field.

