BACKGROUND

Special education has consistently experienced a substantial teacher shortage (Mason-Williams et al., 2019). Attrition has historically been identified as a key contributor to these shortages, particularly in higher poverty schools (Billingis & Bettini, 2019).

Several recent changes in the context of special educators’ work may have changed their roles within schools as well as their likelihood of turning over (Brownell et al., 2010; Mason-Williams et al., 2019). First, students with disabilities are increasingly served in general education settings. Second, students with disabilities are increasingly expected to access and succeed on grade level academic standards and individualized goals. Third, school-wide prevention and intervention systems have emerged as common approaches to providing students with both core content and foundational skills instruction. These changes have coincided with other reform efforts designed to increase the degree of coordination among teachers and more accurately measure teachers’ instructional quality and effectiveness (Jones, Bettini, & Brownell, 2019; Jones & Gilmour, 2019).

No studies have examined how (1) special education teachers’ roles and responsibilities, preparation, and supports have changed over time (2) and the association these changes have had with special education teacher attrition. This study is motivated by the following research questions:

(1) Have special education teachers’ attrition rates, roles and responsibilities, preparation, and perceived supports changed from 2000 to 2012?
(2) How have these changes varied across schools serving a majority of students living in poverty?
(3) Which aspects of roles, responsibilities, preparation, and perceived supports are associated with special education teacher attrition, after accounting for other differences across teachers and students?

METHODS

We used four waves of the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) from the 1999/00 to 2011/12 school year. SASS is a nationally representative sample of public schools and teachers, that we restrict to teachers who report special education as their main teaching assignment (n = 16,870). The variables used in this study are grounded in Conservation of Resources theory (Alarcon, 2011). The responsibilities and roles that define a teachers’ position collectively constitute the demands of the job. Individual strength and resources (i.e., time, training, supports from colleagues) to fulfill their role and address the demands of their roles.

Roles and Responsibilities

Preparation and Support

Service delivery model
- Self-contained class, co-teaching, resource delivery model (i.e., “pull-out” or “push-in”), departmentalized instruction, elementary subject specialist
- School focus
- Special education, career/technical/vocational, alternative, special programs emphasis, regular school
- Number of students with Individualized Education Plans
- Hours of school-related activities a week
- Number of grades taught
- Duties and paperwork interfere with my job of teaching
- Number of students/teachers

Teacher and School Characteristics

Preparation and Support

Uncertified
- Special education field of study
- Teacher experience
- Administrative support
- Adequate materials

Attainment

Switching schools
- Leaving teaching

Switching schools (special education teachers)
- Leaving teaching (special education teachers)
- Leaving schools (all public school teachers)
- Leaving schools (all public school teachers)


Teacher Attrition Rates, Comparing Special Education and All Public School Teachers

Figure 1

RESULTS

Table 2. Preparation and support and roles and responsibilities over time

Table 3. Preparation and support and roles and responsibilities of SET by high- and low-FRLP schools

Table 3. Preparation and support and responsibilities of SET by high- and low-FRLP school status

RESULTS (cont.)

Table 3. Preparation and support and responsibilities of SET by high- and low-FRLP school status

Special educator attrition has historically received substantial attention from policymakers and researchers, without commensurate attention to changes in these teachers’ roles and responsibilities. Our results indicate attrition has declined over time, particularly in high-poverty schools, with the supports they access in schools, have remained stable. Notably, we identified differences across time in special educators’ instructional roles with a substantial increase in co-teaching. Without attending to what work looks like for special educators, we have limited information for how best to support and train these teachers in ways that decrease attrition and promote improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

CONCLUSIONS