

FACTORS AFFECTING THE RETENTION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN THE USA

Svitlana Shumaieva

Candidate of Pedagogical Science, Associate Professor,
Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, Ukraine
e-mail: svetlana.shumaieva75@ukr.net, orcid.org/0000-0003-2706-447X

Summary

The aim of this paper is to provide the information about the specifics of the special educators' work in the United States. The conditions for obtaining a certificate that allows a teacher to hold a relevant position were analysed. It was described the types of certificates such as the Early Childhood Certificate, which allows teachers to work with students from birth to preschool age, the Certificate for Working with Children with Mild or Moderate Disabilities, which allows teachers to work with students from kindergarten to 22 years of age, the DoHH Certificate, which allows teachers to work with deaf and hard of hearing children, and the Certificate VI for students who are partially or totally blind. It was given a detailed description of a special teacher's daily duties, were designated the problems that lead to special educators number decreasing and outlined the ways of the problem solving at different levels.

Key words: special education teachers, general education teachers, teacher preparation program, licensed specialist, requirements for a teaching license, children with special needs, types of certificates.

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1. Introduction

The United States of America is among the international leaders in education quality. According to the United Nations, the U.S. education system in 2024 has an education level index of 0.903 with a maximum possible value of 1. This fully means a high level of teaching staff training, including special education teachers, whose number still does not cover the national needs of the United States. The training of such specialists involves the development of professional knowledge, skills and abilities to teach students with one or more psychophysical disabilities. Such training programs usually involve a long pedagogical practice under the guidance of experienced mentors, but the current challenges associated with the catastrophic shortage of specialists in this field make adjustments and sometimes force to revise and adapt the ways of obtaining a special teacher license in the United States.

The literature review gives a ground to understand that this topic was the subject of scientific researches of Ukrainian and world wide leaders in the field of Pedagogy. The issue of standards of teachers' professional development in the United States was addressed by N. Mukan, O. Pryshlyak, L. Marianna, and others. The issue of developing alternative ways of obtaining the profession of a teacher in the United States was thoroughly considered in the works of N. Pazyura, R. M. Ingersoll and M. Strong investigated the impact of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers, D. Hoppey, J. McLeskey considered the issue of a case study of principal leadership in an effective inclusive school, A. Buttner investigated the issue of special education and the teacher shortage.

The purpose of the article is to outline the problem of reducing the number of special education teachers and identify possible ways to eliminate them.

2. Who is the licensed special education teacher

Special education is a young and developing field of Pedagogy. As the educational community learns more about special learners, it attempts to categorize and identify their needs. People become special education teachers for a variety of reasons: some find more job opportunities in special education after completing a general education teacher preparation program, others have children or relatives with special needs, and choose the career as a way to make a positive difference in their lives. Regardless of the reasons that influenced the decision to become a special educator, there is a certain algorithm that, in a case of successfully completed, gives the opportunity to be considered a licensed specialist in this field. Although the specific requirements for a teaching license vary from state to state, Federal Act No Child Left Behind requires at least a bachelor's degree and a training program to be prepared for working with children with special needs under the supervision of a senior professional. If the teacher is working in a secondary school, he or she must also have a bachelor's degree in one of four core subjects: English, History, Mathematics, or Science. After successfully completing an accredited program, prospective teachers can apply for a provisional certificate, which usually expires after five years.

3. Types of certificates

There are different types of certificates. For example, the Early Childhood Certificate entitles teachers to work with students who have cognitive or physical disabilities from birth to preschool. Teachers who hold a Certificate for working with children with mild to moderate disabilities are eligible to work as a resource specialists (RSPs) or in special day classes (SDCs). As a rule, this certificate allows a teacher to work with students from kindergarten to 22 years old. With properly organized and moderate intervention from a special educator, children in these classes can make significant academic gains. To work with students with severe cognitive or physical disabilities, a teacher must have a Certificate for Work with Moderate or Severe Disabilities, which allows them to teach basic and functional skills to students from kindergarten to 22 years of age. The DoHH Certificate entitles teachers to work with deaf and hard of hearing children, and the VI Certificate with students who are partially or completely blind, both in the absence of cognitive impairment as well as with multiple disabilities. Such certified teachers can also provide consultations to general education teachers in terms of assistive technologies for teaching special children, such as Braille, various orientation and mobility techniques, etc. All four areas of certification allow a special education teacher to teach in any grade level. As a rule, the bachelor's program prepares teachers to work with students with one or two mild disabilities. However, only 25% of new special education teachers work with children with one disability, 46% of teachers work with groups of students with 4–6 disabilities, 65% of teachers work with groups of students who are culturally or linguistically diverse, and 30% of special education teachers teach students who are virtually non-native English speakers. All options require a minimum of a Bachelor's degree, but certification for special education teachers to work with individuals with language impairments requires a Master's degree or a qualifying

certification related to speech and language pathology. The professional certificate is valid for five years. Special education teacher certification can be extended by earning continuing education credits that meet the requirements of the Department of Education. To qualify for renewal, teachers need to complete six college credits and one semester hour related to special education. Additionally, college credits can be substituted with other approved options such as earning a qualifying score on a subject-specific exam, in-service credits, and so on.

4. The peculiarities of a special education teacher's job

The job of a special education teacher is very specific. Unlike other teachers, who focus primarily on teaching, a special education teacher is both an educator and an advocate for students with special needs. The job is challenging and the teacher has to combine many responsibilities. These include: planning, teaching, assessing student achievement, writing, managing and monitoring individualized education plans, reporting on student progress toward educational goals, providing guidance to general education teachers, classroom management, scheduling, instructing, managing and evaluating teaching assistants and other paraprofessionals, developing behavior management plans, and much more.

Although the most professional unions agreed an eight-hour work schedule, special education teachers often work well beyond this standard. A special educator's workday begins an hour before students arrive at school. He or she performs administrative tasks, responds to parents' emails, enters data into the registry, writes the daily schedule on the board, and prepares the classroom for the students' arrival. He or she outlines the day's tasks and delegates them to aides, prepares students for lessons, reads or listens to announcements, collects homework, reviews the daily schedule, assigns study groups, monitors instructional time, assesses progress toward goals, offers individualized academic or behavioral support as needed, collects data and adds it to the IEP files, provides support and guidance to general education teachers, cleans up the classroom, plans for the next day's preparation, attends meetings, reviews Ensures that the IEP is approved by all necessary parties, duplicates documents and distributes to parents, administrators, school district, general education teachers, and special education department. Manages administrative tasks: communicates with parents, teachers, and administrators, schedules new appointments, responds to parent emails and phone calls, and performs other extracurricular duties.

As can be seen working as a special education teacher is often associated with high emotional stress due to the need to address a variety of learning needs and behavioral issues. Limited resources and support can make it difficult to develop effective teaching strategies and individualized instruction for each student. The position of a special education teacher often involves heavy paperwork, including the creation of individualized education plans, which can be time-consuming and tedious. Building relationships with parents can be challenging, especially when there is disagreement about the child's needs and learning strategies. High levels of burnout are caused by intense workloads, emotional demands, and lack of adequate support, leading to many teachers leaving the profession early.

5. A problem of special education teachers' number decreasing

According to the Consortium for Higher Education (2021), the annual attrition rate for special education teachers is twice that of general education teachers. While the average turnover rate for teachers is approximately 10%, the turnover rate for special educators is almost 16% (*Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2020*). Over the past decade, the nation's enrollment has declined by more than 17%, while the number of students receiving special education services has decreased by only 1% (*Samuels, Harwin, 2018*).

The Virginia State Board of Accounts, for example, reported in 2020 that teacher positions that should be filled by licensed teachers are being filled by temporarily licensed teachers or long-term substitute teachers. In the period 2019–2020, more than 30,000 students with special needs received services from teachers with a temporary license. This means that the postulate of a free appropriate public education for all students with disabilities (The Americans With Disabilities Act (1990) (FAPE) has never been maintained. To obtain a special education teacher license in Virginia, an applicant must complete at least 27 hours of special education and have an average of 360 hours of teaching experience, with a provisional special education license allowing a teacher to take only one special education course (*Virginia Department of Education, 2021–2022*). As a result, a high percentage of temporary licenses are issued to less qualified teachers." The number of students receiving special education services in public schools increased from 13% during the 2009–2010 school year to 15% during the 2020–2021 school year (*National Center for Education Statistics, 2022*).

6. Conclusions

Summarizing the above, can be stated that the problem of increasing number of students receiving special education services, combined with the trend that has led to a decrease of special education teachers number, requires urgent solutions in various areas:

Financial component: regular reviews of salaries for special education teachers and bringing them in line with market standards; introduction of bonus programs and bonuses for high performance and long-term service; providing financial support for teachers to attend conferences, seminars and courses aimed at expanding their knowledge and skills.

Professional component: establishing mentoring and coaching programs for new special education teachers to facilitate their adaptation and support; providing access to conferences, seminars and courses on pedagogical excellence for continuous professional development; facilitating teachers' participation in research and projects to stimulate innovation and find new methods of work.

Resource component: providing special education schools with all necessary resources, including specialized equipment and materials; considering the structure of the working environment, taking into account the physical characteristics of working with students with special needs.

Administrative component: establishing mechanisms to effectively resolve conflicts and problems that special education teachers may have; ensuring access to psychological support and counseling for teachers working with special needs students; relieving special education teachers of their workload; rationally distributing additional responsibilities; introducing a system of delegating tasks to assistants and assistants to reduce administrative burden; systematically assessing the need for additional assistants and allocating them accordingly.

Technological component: introduction of digital platforms and programs for automating administrative processes, planning and assessment; technical support for teachers in using modern technologies in the educational process.

Psychological component: creating a favorable atmosphere of cooperation and community among teachers, administration and other school staff; providing access to counseling and psychological services for teachers in cases of stress, burnout and other psychological problems, organizing trainings on emotional health and self-support.

All of these measures, in our opinion, are aimed at creating a stable and supportive atmosphere for special education teachers, which, if followed, will contribute to professional development and retention in education.

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