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Patterns of Licensure for Special Education Teachers

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Patterns of Licensure for Special Education Teachers

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Things to Think About

- Assurance of the quality of teachers has historically been the responsibility of local or state educational entities. In the 21st century the federal government became involved in the matter of quality assurance through the “highly qualified” teacher provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.
- There is no consistency in the licensure patterns for special educators across the United States.
- A sizable majority of states have licensure systems that are a mixture of categorical and non-categorical options, and prekindergarten/kindergarten/grades 1–12 has been the preferred age/grade option for special education licenses.
- In the final quarter of the 20th century, there was a trend in favor of the adoption of noncategorical licensures options by states.
- At the beginning of the 21st century, only 60% of the states have adopted licensure structures that allow for specialization in secondary special education, transition, and/or special education-related
vocational or adult education; and 80% of the states had licensure for early childhood special education personnel.

- In the face of inconsistency in the licensure of early childhood and early childhood special educators, several national professional organizations have called for uniform and distinct licensure patterns in these areas.
- Federal regulations had a significant impact on who was categorized as a “highly qualified” special education teacher, which in turn affects their licensure patterns. In addition to changes in how these teachers are classified when teaching core subject matter, the ways they become “highly qualified” changed as well.

Overview

The purposes of this chapter are to place the topic of state licensing of special education teachers in an historical perspective and to examine the models of special education licensure that have been adopted by states. The authors will use age/grade structures of licensure of special education teachers to organize the complex and varied patterns of licensure that exist across the United States. The age/grade levels used are: PK/K/1–12, secondary, and early intervention/early childhood special education. The federal requirement for “highly qualified” teachers will be examined, especially as it impacts special education teachers. Suggestions for future studies of patterns of licensure for special education teachers and related aspects of licensure are included at the end of the chapter.

In preparing this chapter the authors completed comprehensive searches of electronic databases, including Education Full Text, Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest, WorldCat, and PsychInfo. The authors used the following search terms: certification, licensure, special education teacher, exceptional education, highly qualified, HQT, HQ, NCLB, teacher quality, policy, educational policy, secondary special education, special education transition, early childhood, and early childhood education. Abstracts of identified publications were reviewed, and all relevant articles were considered regardless of publication date. In addition, the reference lists of pertinent publications were examined and citations that were not uncovered in the initial searches were pursued.

Licensure as an Indicator of Teacher Quality

A teaching license is a credential awarded by a state or similar jurisdiction to individuals who have completed mandated requirements such as approved programs of preparation and specialized examinations. Teaching licenses signify that individuals have met state-established minimum requirements designed to assure the quality of individuals hired to teach (Teacher Tools and Advice, 2011).

Mackey and McHenry (1994) observed that credentialing teachers in the United States dates back to the first quarter of the 19th century when local school districts and counties established agencies to examine and license teachers. In the first half of the 19th century, “recruiting and hiring of teachers was a local, private matter” (Sedlak, 1989, p. 259). Teaching appointments were negotiated between a prospective teacher and an individual or group authorized to commit funds on behalf of a school or district. Recruitment practices included active solicitation, and potential teachers were viewed as commodities to be purchased. In this unregulated environment, teaching positions were often used as a form of patronage, and instances of nepotism were not uncommon (Sedlak, 1989).

In the 1830s and 1840s, cities and states recognized the value of free, common schools. Attention was given to the importance of the teaching role, and questions were generated about supplying and selecting teachers (Angus, 2001). There was a growing recognition that many local hiring practices undermined the quality of education. In order to assure the quality of the teaching workforce during
the middle decades of the 19th century, there was a substantial shift from local, autonomous practices in hiring teachers to vesting more responsibility with county officials as a means of centralizing authority and assuring more uniform practices (Sedlak, 1989). As the century progressed, the responsibility for licensure of teachers became more centralized at the state level. This shift of responsibility from the local level to the state level continued into the 20th century. Cook reported (as cited in Sedlak, 1989) that by 1926 all states were involved to some degree in the licensure process, and in three fourths of the states, all teaching licenses were awarded only at the state level.

Early in the 19th century, no formal preparation was required for teachers. Although some form of examination was commonly administered prior to the formal appointment of a teacher, the rigor of the examinations and the way they were administered varied widely among districts. Examinations were often private events with only the applicant and the examiner(s) in attendance. Consequently, the examination process could be easily abused and result in favoritism or patronage (Sedlak, 1989).

At the close of the 19th century, examinations continued to be the primary means of assuring the quality of the teaching workforce (Angus, 2001). However, in addition to examinations, many superintendents recognized the importance of professional education programs for the preparation of teachers. Gradually, access to teaching positions became controlled through performance on examinations and through favoring applicants who participated in professional education programs, especially those provided by normal schools. By 1900 both professional education credentials awarded by professional education programs and examinations were widely used as bases for awarding teaching licenses. However, between 1870 and 1920 the completion of a preparation program grew to become the preferred form of quality assurance for teachers. Reliance on examinations waned.

In the early 20th century, the mechanism for assuring the quality of teacher candidates was to increase the required period of preparation (Sedlak, 1989). After World War I, many normal schools were converted to 4-year institutions; and there was an expansion of universities, many of which had schools or colleges of education. By 1940, 40 states had set licensure standards for secondary teachers at the bachelor’s degree level. Although only 11 states had such a requirement for elementary teachers, there was discernible growth in the number of states that had adopted the bachelor’s degree requirement for them.

During the 1930s, states displayed a renewed interest in establishing credible examinations as a means of guaranteeing the quality of teachers. The movement to return to the use of examinations as a measure of teacher quality led to the creation of the National Teacher Examination, which was first administered in 1940 (Sedlak, 1989). From the 1930s until the present, dual criteria—completion of a program of preparation and passing an examination—have been used by states to control entry to the profession of teaching.

At the beginning of the 21st century, state efforts to assure the quality of teachers were strongly influenced by the federal government through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB “dramatically expanded the role of the federal government in public education by holding states, school districts, and schools accountable for producing measurable gains in students’ achievement” (Yell, 2012, p. 57). NCLB provided a definition of a Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) and required that all teachers be highly qualified by June 30, 2006. The general definition of “highly qualified” follows:

(A) when used with respect to any public elementary school or secondary school teacher teaching in a State, means that—

(i) the teacher has obtained full State certification as a teacher (including certification obtained through alternative routes to certification) or passed the State teacher licensing examination, and holds a license to teach in such State, except that when used with respect to any teacher teaching in a public charter school, the term means that the teacher meets the requirements set forth in the State’s public charter school law; and
(ii) the teacher has not had certification or licensure requirements waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis; (NCLB, 20 U.S.C. § 9101)

NCLB provides clarifying language for new elementary school teachers, and new middle and secondary school teachers, as well as for teachers who are not new to the profession.

In 2004 The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) made clear the application of the HQT requirement to special educators. IDEIA continues the “federal involvement in the education of students with disabilities” that began nearly a half-century earlier—in the late 1950s (Yell, 2012, p. 52)—and introduces a federal standard for assuring the qualifications of special education teachers. The law required that new special education teachers have a bachelor’s degree, have completed requirements for state licensure in special education, or be enrolled in an alternative certification (AC) program for special education that meets the state requirements. In addition, a special education teacher who teaches a core academic subject must demonstrate subject area competency commensurate with the grade level they teach. This competence must be demonstrated through an objective measure (e.g., coursework, assessments) as determined by each state. Schools can avoid the HQT content-area requirements if they solely utilize consultative or inclusive service delivery models for delivery of content knowledge (34 CFR Parts 300 and 301, Final Rule, 2006). A more in-depth discussion of the HQT expectations for special education teachers is provided later in this chapter. It is important to recognize that the HQT provisions in NCLB and IDEIA mark a shift from more than a century of states’ being the source of regulations for quality of teacher to a situation in which the federal government now has noticeable influence on efforts to assure the quality of teachers.

Licensure of Special Education Teachers

Interest in states’ models and requirements for licensing teachers of students with disabilities corresponds roughly with federal involvement in the education of students with disabilities. In the early 1950s Mackie & Dunn (1954) published a comprehensive study of special education licensure. Since that time many studies of special education licensure have been conducted, and the picture they present is a complex and confusing one.

As was mentioned in the overview section, an age/grade framework will be used to organize patterns of licensure for special education teachers. The organizational structure will consist of three levels: K–12, secondary/transition personnel, and early intervention and early childhood special education. The levels are not discrete. There is overlap between the K–12 and the other two levels.

Licensure of Special Education Teachers for Students in Grades K–12

Four dimensions of licensure requirements will be examined in this section. The first is whether the state’s standards for special education licensure are course-based or competency-based. The second dimension is whether the licensure model is freestanding or an add-on to a general education teaching license. The third and fourth dimensions focus on the breadth of licensure models—areas/titles of licensure and age/grade ranges.

Course-Based or Credit Hour-Based Versus Competency-Based or Standards-Based

Licensure requirements for teachers tend to be course/credit-hour-based or competency/standards-based. That is, states have adopted standards that either stipulate courses by title or topic or a minimum number of credit hours that must be completed successfully, or they identify competencies that must be demonstrated or content standards that must learned in order for a candidate to be eligible for a license.
At the beginning of the 21st century, more than 60% of the states that award teaching licenses for special educators had course-based requirements (Geiger, 2002).

“Completion of the curricula of state-approved institutions of higher education’ was a basis for issuing a credential in special education” in all states at the beginning of the 21st century (Geiger, 2002, p. 8). In eight states it was the sole basis for issuing a license. For 31 states the completion of courses or credit hours in the curriculum of a state-approved institution of higher education was an additional requirement. About three quarters of the 31 states required a minimum number of credit hours in specific content areas. The number of credit hours required by the states varied noticeably. The lowest was nine credit hours, and the highest was 45. Seven of the 31 states specified a minimum number of credit hours in special education that must be completed, but the content was not prescribed. In those seven states, the number of credit hours in special education ranged from 18 to 30.

In the same study, 16 states required that applicants for special education licensure demonstrate state-adopted standards or competencies for special educators rather than the completion of courses. Three of these states also required applicants to successfully complete performance assessments that involved formal observations of teaching in order to receive a license in special education.

Geiger (2002) also found that 11 states were giving serious consideration to changing the basis for issuing licenses in special education at the beginning of the 21st century. Nearly three fourths of those states planned to shift from requiring a specific number of credit hours in special education to the demonstration of competencies and/or completion of performance assessments.

**Freestanding Versus Added to General Education**

When the matter of freestanding versus add-on models of special education licensure has been examined since the passage of P.L. 94–142 in 1975, the freestanding model of licensure has consistently been found to be the most commonly adopted. In this model, special education teachers are not required to have licensure in another area of education (for example, elementary or secondary education) prior to being awarded a license in special education.

In 1977, Gilmore and Aroyros found the freestanding model was the most common form of licensure in special education. A few years later Barresi and Bunte (1979) reported that about one third of the states had a free standing model of licensure for special educators, one third had a model that added special education to licensure in general education, and one third offered both options. In the 1990s and into the 21st century, the preference for the freestanding model of special education licensure continued to be reported (Piercy & Bowen, 1993; Putnam & Habanek, 1993; Geiger, 2002).

Since 2002, there have been no studies of the freestanding versus add-on to general education patterns of licensure for special education teachers. In the most recent investigation of this dimension of special education licensure patterns, Geiger (2002) reported that over 80% of the licensing jurisdictions in the United States did not require that special educators be licensed in general education. Seven states reported that licensure in general education was required of special educators. Two other states reported they would move from a freestanding model to one that required licensure in general education. One state reported that it anticipated moving in the other direction.

Geiger’s study preceded the highly qualified teacher requirement mandated in the 2004 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). As a consequence of that legislation, special education teachers who provide direct initial instruction in core academic subjects (e.g., mathematics, reading or language arts, and science) at the secondary level must demonstrate subject-matter competence in each subject taught. At the elementary education level, special education teachers should have subject-matter knowledge appropriate to elementary education content. Although there are a variety of means states can use to assure such competence, one means would be to require that special education teachers be licensed also in general education for the grade level and core subject areas they teach. Additional flexibilities in meeting licensure requirements are discussed later in the chapter.
Areas/Titles of Licensure for Special Educators

States have adopted a wide array of area/titles for licenses in special education. One of the earliest comprehensive studies of special education licensure was conducted by Mackie and Dunn (1954). At that time 32 states and the District of Columbia issued special teaching licenses for teachers of exceptional children, whereas 16 states did not. In their report, Mackie and Dunn presented summaries of licensure requirements across 10 categories of disability. The number of categories of disability for which states issued licenses for special education teachers ranged from one to all 10 categories. In this early study of special education licensure requirements, variety emerged as a hallmark of licensure practices for special educators. Although there have been frequent changes in licensure requirements and configurations since the 1950s, variety has remained a constant characteristic.

A few years prior to the passage of P.L. 94–142, Abeson and Fleury published State Certification Requirements for Education of the Handicapped (1972). A purpose of this report was to allow for comparisons of licensure requirements to be made across states. At that time most states had licensure requirements for various categories of disabilities. The number of disability areas for which there were licensure requirements ranged from one to eight. The most common disability categories in which licenses were awarded were mental retardation, hearing impairment, speech/language, visual impairment, and physical disabilities. In the early 1970s, fewer than 10 states reported some form of noncategorical licensure for special educators.

A few years after the passage of P.L. 94–142, Gilmore and Aroyros (1977) published another comprehensive study of special education licensure. This study confirmed that there were many differences across states in the licenses that were issued for special educators. The major differences were in the number and types of disability categories for licenses. In order to analyze the variety of licensure requirements among the states, the authors created a classification system based on the number of categories: those with six or more categories and those with less than six. Thirty-five states had at least six disability categories for which licenses were issued; nine states reported less than six each. The most frequently reported categories for licensure were hearing impairments (43), vision impairments (39), speech/language impairments (37), mental retardation (35), emotional disturbance (33), physical disabilities (33), and learning disabilities (31).

Barresi and Bunte (1979) reported the results of a study similar to that conducted by Gilmore and Aroyros. They also used number of categories as the basis for identifying models of special education licenses. In their system, states with six or more areas of licensure in special education were judged to have a categorical model, and those with fewer were classified as a generic model. Thirty-five states were found to have categorical models, and 14 had generic models. One state used both. They also discovered that some of the states classified as categorical had a generic license as one of the licensure options.

Since the foundational work of the 1970s, scholars have periodically examined categorical and noncategorical/generic options for licensure of special education teachers. In general the options adopted by states have been able to be classified as categorical, noncategorical/generic, or a mix of the two. Within these three broad structural classifications of special education licensure there is great variability. For example, two states may have primarily a categorical structure for their special education licensure system, but the categories for licensure in State A differ from those in State B. Substantial differences can also be observed across states that have adopted noncategorical systems for licensure as well as in states with systems that include both categorical and noncategorical options for licensure.

In the 1980s, a shift away from states’ use of solely categorical models was observed (Chapey, Pyszkowski, & Trimarco, 1985; McLaughlin & Stettner-Eaton, 1988). Growth was seen in the number of states that adopted noncategorical or generic models of licensure for special education teachers, and the practice of states offering a mixture of categorical and noncategorical options was reported with greater frequency. In 1986, McLaughlin, Smith-Davis, and Burke reported that 30 of 56 states had categorical models of licensure, and the remaining 26 had noncategorical models. They also noted that many states
offered both options. Noncategorical and mixed models of special education licensure were increasingly popular in the 1990s and into the first part of the 21st century (Berkeley, 1990; National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1990; National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, 2000; Mainzer & Horvath, 2001; Putnam & Habanek, 1993).

The most recent study of this aspect of special education teacher licensure patterns was conducted by Geiger (2002). He reported that only five states had licensure options that were solely categorical, and three had solely noncategorical options. More than 80% of the states offered a mixture of categorical and noncategorical options. One reason for the high percentage of states having mixed options is the fact that nearly all of them retained categorical options in the areas of visual impairment and hearing impairment.

Excluding early childhood special education, the licensure options used most frequently at the beginning of the 21st century were hearing impairment (47), vision impairment (46), emotional disturbance (27), some form of an overall general special education license (27), some form of general special education license based on level of disability (e.g., mild disabilities) (27), specific learning disabilities (23), mental retardation (22), and orthopedic impairments (21). When the options reported in Geiger’s study (2002) are compared with those reported a quarter century earlier by Gilmore and Aroyros (1977), it can be seen that categorical licenses in the areas of sensory impairment continue to be the most common, but there have been declines in the use of some other categorical areas. In 1977, the majority of states had six or more categorical areas. In 2002, only five states had licensure models consisting solely of categorical options. In 1977, 13 states were reported as having some form of noncategorical or generic option for certification. In 2002, more than 40 jurisdictions offered some form of noncategorical or generic licensure option in special education.

Since the implementation of P.L. 94–142, “a substantial majority of jurisdictions have adopted licensure structures that include a mixture of categorical and noncategorical licensure options” (Geiger, 2002. p. 21). One explanation for the growth of noncategorical licensure options is that they may provide states and local education agencies with flexibility needed to address chronic shortages of special education teachers. At the beginning of the 21st century, some form of noncategorical special education licensure was the most popular. This conclusion is based on the fact that more than 80% of the degrees awarded in special education were in some form of general special education (Mainzer & Horvath, 2001).

**Age/Grade Levels of Special Education Licensure**

In special education, patterns of licensure vary not only by area/title but also by age/grade levels. Although comprehensive licenses (e.g., K–12) in special education are by far the most common options, some states also offer more restrictive age/grade options.

In the late 1970s, a substantial majority of states had a K–12 or P–12 model of special education licensure. Only 10 states had more restrictive age/grade ranges, e.g., elementary or secondary (Gilmore & Aroyros, 1977).

Putnam and Habanek (1993), in an article on licensure requirements for teachers of students with mild disabilities, reported 11 different age ranges for special education licensure in the 48 states that provided information on this aspect of licensure. The most common age range was K–12. Thirty–one states offered this option, and two more offered grades 1–12. Thirteen states had some grade range for licensure in elementary special education, and a few had middle-grades licensure for special educators. Five states reported secondary licensure that included middle grades, and nine states offered secondary special education licensure options that did not include the middle grades. It is no wonder that Putnam and Habanek included “States of Confusion” in the title of their article.

A few years later, Steffens (1996) reported that some version of a comprehensive age/grade range for special education licensure was in place in more than 60% of the states. In addition 20% of the states
offered some version of elementary, middle, or secondary special education licenses, and some states offered options for both comprehensive (e.g., K–12 licenses) and more restricted age/grade licenses in special education (e.g., elementary). At the beginning of the 21st century approximately two thirds of the states offered only comprehensive (e.g., K–12) options for licensure in special education. The other one third offered a mixture that included both comprehensive licenses and age/grade specific options (Geiger, 2002).

Licensure for Secondary Special Educators and Transition Personnel

One age/grade level that has been examined over time is the licensure of secondary special education teachers. In 1973, prior to the passage of P.L. 94–142, Clark and Oliverson conducted a study of the preparation of special education personnel for secondary schools. In one facet of the study, they reported that 14 of the 47 states that responded had 6–12 licensure for secondary and special education, eight states have 6–12 special education licensure only, and seven states had special education 9–12 only. (It was not clear from the manner in which the results were reported whether a single state reported multiple options.) In 1977, Gilmore and Aroyros identified 10 states that had licensure options for secondary special education teachers. There were a few studies in the 1980s that addressed the matter of licensure models for secondary special education teachers. One of these (Bagwell, 1982) focused on teachers of students with learning disabilities and reported that seven states had different requirements for elementary and secondary teachers of students with learning disabilities. In a second study, Fearn (1987) reported that 21 states had some form of secondary special education licensure.

In 1990, the reauthorization of P.L. 94–142, IDEA, included requirements for transition planning for adolescents with disabilities. This requirement contained expectations for special education in secondary schools. A few years after federal legislation mandated transition services in secondary schools, Putnam and Habanek (1993) reported that the most prevalent age range pattern for special education licensure for secondary special educators was K–12. Only nine states had special education licensure options uniquely focused on secondary special education teachers.

In 2003, Kleinhammer-Tramill, Geiger, and Morningstar examined licensure patterns across all states for evidence of special education-relevant vocational education, secondary special education, and transition licenses. At that time, states’ licensure systems included the following opportunities for a transition or secondary education credential relevant for personnel who served students with disabilities:

1. Twelve states had licensure or endorsement options of some form for Transition Specialists, Vocational Special Needs, Vocational Education, or Rehabilitation Counselors focused on special education transition.
2. Three states offered Career Technical Education, Adult Education, and Vocational Education credentials that required special education content preparation.
3. Twenty states listed special educator credentials focused on adolescents and/or secondary education services.
4. Four states had licensure options for Transition Specialists, Vocational or Rehabilitation personnel, and Adolescent/Secondary Special Education.
5. Overall, an unduplicated total of 31 states had licensure structures that allowed for specialization in secondary special education, transition, and/or special education-related vocational or adult education.

The authors also examined state licensure systems for evidence of transition-relevant content requirements such as competencies, standards, or required courses. The findings from this second analysis indicated that 35 states, or 70% of all state licensure systems, had some transition-relevant competencies or
required courses. However, in some of these states, transition-relevant competencies or courses were included only for certain disability categories (e.g., vision impairment) but not for others.

**Licensure in Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)**

Licensure for special education personnel who work with young children with disabilities has been studied more extensively than has licensure for special education personnel who work with adolescents with disabilities. In this section, we present a historical overview of the development of early childhood special education (ECSE) licensure, discuss the complex context of ECSE including the variety of professional roles and settings in which ECSE is provided, and examine patterns of licensure for ECSE teachers that prepare them for these roles and settings in which they will work. Patterns of ECSE licensure are influenced by many factors including degree and other educational requirements, variations in age/grade range, independence from or linkage to other licenses or areas of licensure, and the extent to which models are standards-based/competency-based. Finally, the influence of federal policies and regulations on early childhood special education are discussed.

**Development of Early Childhood Special Education**

When P.L. 94–142, The Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EHA) was enacted in 1975, the right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for children with disabilities age 3 to 21 years was established. However, the law did not require a FAPE for 3- to 5-year-olds when such a requirement was inconsistent with state law or practice. Also, the EHA did not include provisions related to special education services for children with disabilities under the age of 3. Accordingly, special education licensure for professionals working with young children was not a high priority when the law was first enacted.

In 1986, the EHA was amended by P.L. 99–457, and Section 619 of Part B extended FAPE to all children with disabilities ages 3 through 5. The 1986 amendments also extended provisions to infants and toddlers under what was then Part H of the Act (Saunders, 1995). In addition, states had the option to serve infants and toddlers found to be at-risk for substantial developmental delay. In 1990, further amendments to EHA renamed the legislation as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Part H was reassigned as Part C.

The number of states offering licensure specific to ECSE dramatically increased after 1986. This increase is evident through an historical review of ECSE licensure. In 1980, Trohanis et al. reported that only four states offered licensure in the area of ECSE, and eight more were moving toward putting ECSE licensure structures in place. In 2002, Geiger reported that 80% of 51 states offered licensure in ECSE. Additionally, two states indicated that a credential would be added in the near future. During the two decades that separated these studies, more than 70% of the states created models for licensing early childhood special educators.

**Variety of Roles and Settings for Early Childhood Special Education**

Within the 1986 amendments to EHA, a family-centered, interdisciplinary, and collaborative framework of services emerged and defined the nature of early childhood services (Klein & Gilkerson, 2000). With that framework came recommendations for personnel preparation and, in turn, the need to credential professionals who would constitute the early childhood special education/early intervention professional community. Twelve professional roles were identified within the Part C early intervention context (Moherek Sopko, 2010). These were: early intervention specialist/developmental specialist/infant toddler specialist; occupational therapist; physical therapist; nurse; speech language pathologist; paraprofessional; audiologist; nutritionist; social worker; counselor; psychologist; and service coordinator.
Many of these same professional roles are involved in the provision of services under Section 619 of Part B in preschool settings.

The physical settings that house ECSE are also highly variable. Kagan, Kauerz, and Tarrant (2008) described the diverse contexts for delivering ECSE services. Among these contexts are private childcare centers, home-based centers, Head Start, state-funded pre-K, and public school early childhood programs. These settings are host to a variety of licensed and nonlicensed professionals, such as early childhood educators, childcare providers, and Head Start staff.

Although this chapter focuses on licensure patterns for special education and will not explore licensure for other professional roles in depth, the brief preceding discussion illustrates the complexity of the context for which early childhood special educators are prepared. Given this context, it is not surprising that great dissimilarity is observed among the states in terms of licensure patterns for ECSE professionals.

Degree and Other Educational Requirements for ECSE Teachers

The educational requirements of states vary widely regarding expectations for providers of early intervention services and early childhood special education personnel. A majority of the states (73%) require Part C early interventionists (early childhood special educators or equivalent instructional personnel) to possess a bachelor degree (Moherek Sopko, 2010). However, only 39% require state licensure, and 9.8% report no requirements at all. Table 3.1 displays degree and licensure requirements for early interventionists (Part C) as reported by Moherek Sopko in 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Associate’s degree</th>
<th>Bachelor’s degree</th>
<th>Master’s degree</th>
<th>Professional association certification</th>
<th>Additional knowledge and skills specific to EI</th>
<th>State licensure</th>
<th>No requirement</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Moherek Sopko, 2010, pp. 2–3.*

*Note: States may have more than one requirement. Therefore, a state may be reported in more than one category in the table.*

Similar variation in preparatory requirements has also been reported for Part B contexts. Numerous preschool settings across the states do not require early childhood staff to have college degrees or specific licensure (Stayton et al., 2009). Saracho and Spodek (2006) detail the range of professional requirements for early childhood educators across preschool settings. Public school ECSE teachers in all early childhood programs in all 50 states are required to have at least a bachelor’s degree and a state teacher’s license. State-funded pre-K programs were reported to have requirements ranging from 24 credit hours to a bachelor’s degree with a specific early childhood education endorsement.

Age/Grade Variations of Licensure Applicability

Another aspect of variability within ECSE licensure is the age or grade range to which licenses apply. At least 12 different licensure configurations based on age spans were identified in 1999 by Ratcliff, Cruz, and McCarthy. In 2003, Geiger, Crutchfield, and Mainzer examined states that offered ECSE licensure and highlighted variability across states in terms of age/grade levels. Recently, Lazara et al. (2010) found that licensure requirements for ECSE preschool teachers in 36 states consisted of 13 different age ranges. The range of birth to 5 years was found to be the most prevalent. Ranges of birth to grade 3, birth to
kindergarten, and 3 to 5 years were also common. In 2009, Stayton et al. surveyed preschool special education coordinators (Part B 619 of IDEA) in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and US territories. Their findings are consistent with previous studies (Lazara et al., 2010; Geiger, 2002; Ratcliff, Cruz, & McCarthy, 1999). That is, ECSE licensure requirements vary greatly across states regarding age/grade ranges and the model of licensure. Stayton et al. (2009) identified 11 different age ranges. The most common configurations were birth–5 years (30%), birth–8 years (19%), 3–5 years (15%), and 3 years to grade 12 (8%). The remaining seven configurations are used in only one state each (Stayton et al., 2009).

Freestanding, Add-On, Blended, and Other Models of Licensure

The ECSE licensure landscape is also highly variable regarding the overall design of licensure models for early child special educators. In the Stayton et al. (2009) study, 68% of the Part B 619 coordinators, in response to a question about models of licensure, indicated that there was only one route to ECSE licensure in their state. However, the single routes reflected six different models. These models were: ECSE (n = 13, 50%); ECSE endorsement added onto special education or regular education license (n = 6, 23.07%); blended ECE and ECSE license (n = 3, 11.54%); special education license (n = 2, 7.69%); both ECSE and special education endorsement (n = 1, 3.85%); and both ECE and special education endorsement (n = 1, 3.85%). Twelve states reported having two or more routes to qualify to teach young children with special needs. One state coordinator reported that six different routes to licensure were available.

Licensure Based on Standards or Competencies

Stayton et al. (2009) also investigated whether ECSE licensure guidelines were based on standards/competencies. Twenty-nine (76%) of the 38 states that participated in the study had licensure requirements that were standards/competency-based. Three states had semester or quarter hour requirements for designated content areas, three had specific content requirements and deferred to colleges/universities on how to address these requirements, and three offered options that included standards/competencies among others (Stayton et al., 2009).

Influence of Federal Policy and Regulation

There is no apparent consistency across states’ licensure models for early childhood special education teachers and early interventionists. One reason for the variability in ECSE licensing is the fact that IDEA gives states the responsibility to determine requirements for early childhood special educators. IDEA also stipulates that states are responsible for determining licensure requirements for early childhood special educators under Part B, Section 619. In addition to licensure requirements, the 2006 Part B Regulations of IDEA stipulate that teachers in early childhood or preschool programs that are part of a public school system must meet the highly qualified special education teacher requirements under NCLB (Stayton et al., 2009; Walsh, 2006).

Federal policies have attempted to address teacher qualifications for some ECE settings (Stayton et al., 2009). For example, changes in Head Start teacher requirements reflect the value placed upon teacher education (Blank, 2010). As of October 1, 2011, all Head Start classrooms were required to have a teacher who has an associate, baccalaureate, or advanced degree in early childhood education or an equivalent discipline (Administration for Children and Families, 2008). However, this requirement will have minimal impact on much of the variability that exists in licensure requirements for early childhood special educators.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC/CEC) have called for the development
of freestanding licensure with common standards for all educators (special and general education) working with children birth to 8 years of age to encourage reciprocity across states (Stayton et al., 2009; Hyson, 2003; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). Within the birth-to-8 age span, there are three distinct age groups: infant/toddler, preschool, and primary. Preparation in two contiguous age groups is recommended by these organizations. NAECYC and DEC are not alone in recommending common standards for all early childhood educators. As reported in Stayton et al. (2009), other organizations, including the Association for Childhood Education International, the National Association of State Boards of Education, and the American Federation of Teachers have issued recommendations for uniform and distinct early childhood licensure. These recommendations are fairly consistent regarding content requirements for ECE and ECSE licensure. Until these or similar recommendations are adopted by states throughout the nation, inconsistency will prevail as a hallmark of licensure for early childhood education personnel.

Licensure of Special Education Teachers and the Highly Qualified Teacher Requirement

Previously in the chapter, reference was made to a federal requirement for highly qualified teachers. In 2001, President George W. Bush signed NCLB into law. The regulations for this piece of federal legislation defined a highly qualified (HQ) teacher. In 2004, President Bush reauthorized the IDEIA. This reauthorization contained definitions for HQ special education teachers aligned with NCLB (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In the reauthorized IDEA, provisions to meet the “highly qualified” standard were made for new special education teachers, for those who were teaching children with disabilities working toward alternative achievement standards, and for those who were teaching multiple subjects to children with disabilities.

At a minimum new special education teachers are required to have a bachelor’s degree, have completed requirements for state licensure in special education, or be enrolled in an alternative certification program for special education that meets the state requirements. Teachers may not have special education certification or licensure requirements waived on a temporary, emergency, or provisional basis (34 CFR 300.18(b)(1)).

Although full state licensure is required to be a HQ special education teacher under the regulations for IDEA, a fully licensed special education teacher may not be a HQ special education teacher unless he/she has met the core subject requirements expected for the teaching assignment. It is reasonable to expect that the core subject requirements in the HQ definition have significantly impacted preparation and licensing.

A special education teacher who teaches a core academic subject must demonstrate subject area competency commensurate with the grade level they teach. This competence can be demonstrated in a variety of ways determined by the state. Special education teachers who teach a core academic subject only to children assessed on alternate achievement standards (i.e., children who are not expected to meet grade-level standards even when provided with the best instruction) must meet the general requirements for being a licensed special education teacher and the standards set for HQ elementary school teachers. In cases where a special education teacher is teaching to alternative standards, but a student needs instruction above the elementary school level (e.g., a high school student performs at the seventh grade level in mathematics, but not as high in any other subject area), the special education teacher would need to demonstrate competence in the subject area to the grade level needed to teach effectively to those standards. These changes place new emphasis on subject-matter preparation where the historical emphasis has been on pedagogy.

To help address the need, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has competitively funded IHEs to redesign special education preparation programs so graduates will be prepared to meet the HQ requirements and to meet the needs of students with high-incidence disabilities. At present 65
IHEs have been awarded 325T grants to improve their special education teacher preparation (National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development, 2012).

High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE)

Regulations for HQ special education teachers allow states to build multiple pathways to determining a teacher is HQ. States may use content-knowledge assessments; a content-area major, graduate degree, or licensure; or a High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE) (IDEA, 2004). This flexibility allows states to determine if teachers can meet the definition of HQ in all core areas through one streamlined process (i.e., multisubject HOUSSE) or by completion of several objective measures of core content knowledge in one content area (i.e., single-subject HOUSSE) (Burdette, Laflin, & Muller, 2005). While new special educators must meet HQ special education licensure requirements as well as content requirements in one subject area for initial licensure, single or multisubject HOUSSEs may be used for (a) new special educators who need HQ status for multiple subject areas, provided they are already HQ in one subject area; or (b) experienced special educators hired prior to 2002 who are not HQ in one or more subject areas. This flexibility is particularly pertinent to special educators providing direct instruction in secondary school core content areas assessed at standard levels, and the multisubject HOUSSEs were developed to address both general and special educators teaching in multiple content areas.

Most states’ HOUSSE mechanisms use a combination of classroom experience, professional development, and demonstrated knowledge in the content area (Burdette, Laflin, & Muller, 2005). A survey of state-level officials identified course work and course credits as valid and objective indicators of content knowledge and valued them over measures such as professional development workshops and awards (Drame & Pugach, 2010). Concerns over state HOUSSE’s rigor and varying procedures have led some educational experts to question HOUSSE assessment validity and reliability (Government Accountability Office, 2005); and some state officials have admitted that special education HOUSSEs typically require fewer content courses that general education HOUSSEs (Drame & Pugach, 2010). However, the majority of state officials indicated that the phase-out of HOUSSE requirements would be detrimental to their state’s abilities to meet special education HQ content-area requirements.

Introduction by the federal government of the HQ requirement for special education teachers at the beginning of the 21st century added to the complexity of the crazy quilt of standards and patterns for licensure of special education teachers that already existed in the United States. As a result of the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, special education teachers must not only meet the licensure standards adopted by the state in which they teach but must also be judged to be highly qualified for the specifics of their teaching assignments.

Summary and Suggestions for Future Research

Licensure is a mechanism by which states assure the quality of teachers. In the public school sector of the United States, responsibility for the assurance of teacher quality has shifted during the last two centuries from immediate employers to state agencies. In the early 21st century, the federal government became involved in quality assurance through NCLB and IDEIA.

States have adopted many patterns of licensure for special educators. In order to study these patterns, core elements or dimensions of licensure have been identified. These dimensions include course- or credit-hour-based and competency-based state standards, freestanding/stand alone special education licenses and models that require adding a license in special education to one in general education or being prepared concurrently for both, areas/titles of licenses, and age/grade ranges for licenses. With regard to the latter dimension, great variability exists even within subsets of ages/grades, such as licenses for secondary and transition personnel and for personnel in preschool special education programs (Section 619) and early intervention programs (Part C).
With the exception of a few studies of patterns of licensure for early childhood special educators, most research on patterns of special education licensure predates the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, P.L. 108–466, which contained a provision for highly qualified special education teachers. In order to deliver direct initial instruction in a core content area, the special educator is required to demonstrate content knowledge of that subject (e.g., mathematics). Since that requirement was mandated, there have been no studies of patterns of licensure for special education teachers in the elementary and secondary grades. The impact of the highly qualified teacher provision in P.L. 108–466 (and in NCLB) on patterns of licensure for special education teachers remains unknown and is an important area for future investigation.

Future research efforts should follow current trends that include dual-enrollment programs (i.e., elementary education or core content plus special education), alternative certification, and programs developed to meet HOUSSE requirements. However, large-scale, national studies on these topics are limited by current state and national data collection systems. First, the current HQT data systems do not appear to be accurate (Steinbrecher, McKeown, & Walther-Thomas, in press). In addition, critical discrepancies exist across national data sets due to inconsistencies among data sources, missing data points, and definitions of HQT. Second, the current HQT data collection systems do not distinguish between teachers who are licensed through traditional or alternate routes: both groups are considered highly qualified.

There is also little research on how HQT requirements have impacted the requirements in traditional university-based special education licensing programs. There is little understanding whether programs have added core content requirements to build candidates’ knowledge base, whether more states have adopted licensure models that require licensure in general education prior to or concurrent with licensure in special education as a means of assuring required content knowledge, whether more programs are moving from special education licensing at the bachelors’ level to special educator licensing at the masters’ level to accommodate the new content knowledge focus, or if more states are moving toward distinct elementary and secondary special education credentials to accommodate the HQ content requirements for endorsements (e.g., requirements for a K–6 math endorsement may be different than requirements for 7–12 math endorsement).

In addition, there is little research on the effects of HQT on special educator attrition or service delivery. One potential impact of the HQT requirement in secondary schools is an increase in co-teaching to serve students with disabilities in content classes. There is little research to verify whether the HQT requirement has had this impact, whether this has resulted in additional professional development and state funding support for implementing a co-teaching model, and most importantly the effect of these changes on outcomes for students with disabilities. While many states now recommend the use of co-teaching in secondary content areas to enable special educators to meet HQT requirements, the capacity (e.g., co-teaching knowledge, special educators, funding) to support increases in this service delivery model is questionable. Finally, is special education service delivery still based on the student’s least restrictive environment (LRE) or is it now a combination of student LRE and their assigned special educator HQT qualifications? That is, are students being assigned to certain placements despite the recommendations of the Individualized Education Program team, because their special educator is not highly qualified in that subject? These questions as well as others remain unanswered as we move forward with the implementation of the HQT requirements in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA.

Significant variance in patterns of special education licensure has been observed for decades. However, there are few attempts to systematically study the impact of different patterns of licensure for special educators on how well special educators are prepared, and the resulting effects on the performance of the students they teach. Until such research is conducted and certain patterns are determined to be more conducive to preparation that results in effective instruction and learning gains by students with disabilities, there is little reason (other than possibly supply and demand) to expect that states will consider adopting more common patterns of licensure for special educators.
Licensure is intended to assure the quality of individuals hired to teach. Effective teaching should promote learning gains by students. At this stage in the evolution of licensure for special education teachers, it cannot be said that any pattern or patterns of special education licensure results in a more effective special education teacher and increased learning by the children they teach.

Notes

1 In this chapter a teaching license and a teaching certificate are considered to be interchangeable.
2 In this chapter “state” is used to represent states or comparable jurisdictions that award teaching licenses/certificates.

References


