JOSEA
THE JOURNAL OF SPECIAL EDUCATION APPRENTICESHIP
ISSN 2167-3454
Vol. 12(1) January 2023

# Characteristics of Special Education Field Placements: An Exploratory Study

Karin M. Fisher[1] and Angela Norris[2]
[1]Georgia Southern University
[2]University of Northern Colorado

Research and policy in the field of teacher education recommend that special education (SPED) programs include opportunities for candidates to practice in supervised field experiences. Such field experiences (a) engage candidates in professional practice, (b) reduce their anxiety, (c) gain confidence, and (d) allow them to view themselves as educators. However, there is a lack of research on the characteristics of field placements in SPED. As a result of the dearth in the literature, the researchers discussed the results of an exploratory single survey study of 42 faculty members from institutes of higher education (IHE) from across the United States (US). Results found variability of data from institutions in 18 different states. The characteristics of field placements and the responsibilities of the teacher candidate (TC), university supervisor (US), and clinical supervisor (CS) are described. Lastly, the mean number of hours in each placement was calculated and described for Bachelor of Science in Education (BSED) programs, along with implications and future research.

*Keywords*: placements, teacher preparation, teacher candidates, university supervisors

**Author Note:**
We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Karin Fisher, Dept. of Elementary and Special Education, PO Box 8134, Statesboro, GA, 30460. Email: Kfisher@georgiasouthern.edu

To become a certified teacher in the United States (US), one must become licensed to teach in a specific area. All states have teacher licensing requirements that require a field experience, also known as clinical practice (National Research Council; NRC, 2001). Field experiences are classroom-based opportunities carried out under the supervision of a lead teacher, often called the cooperating/mentor teacher or on-site clinical supervisor (CS). They provide opportunities for teacher candidates (TCs) to develop an experiential understanding of student learning. Furthermore, field experiences help candidates develop appropriate teaching strategies while being mentored by a clinical supervisor (Retallick & Miller, 2010). Field experiences are among the most essential experiences in teacher preparation programs (Baum & Korth, 2013; Bornfreund, 2011; Zeichner, 2010).

Many preservice teachers obtain their field experiences through teacher education programs offered through institutes of higher education (IHEs). Field experiences are mandated by accreditation institutions (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), 2019; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), 2010) and recommended by other organizations (Council for Exceptional Children; CEC, 2015; NRC, 2015). The Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education Programs (CAEP) states that teacher education programs must design high-quality clinical practices central to candidates' preparation so they develop the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to impact P-12 learning positively (2019). Additionally, CAEP standards state that field experiences should be extensive and intensive for candidates to demonstrate proficiency. As a result of the increase in standards, teacher educators have emphasized the need for quality fieldwork experiences for preservice teachers (Prater & Sileo, 2002; Stein & Stein, 2016). However, the accrediting agencies do not prescribe how teacher education programs should implement field experiences.

Field experiences are integral to teacher preparation programs because they allow preservice teachers to link theory to practice and provide scaffolded experiences with increasing responsibilities (CEC, 2015). Furthermore, teacher education programs often provide candidates with opportunities to (a) observe, (b) assist, (c) plan, (d) teach, (e) manage behavior, (f) assess and evaluate data, and (g) interact with students, faculty, staff, and parents. While

researchers have noted the benefits of field experiences, there is a variance in the design and duration of clinical experiences (Singh, 2017). Institutes of higher education prepare teachers, and the intensity of field experiences can vary within and across states (La Paro et al., 2014; NRC, 2015; Schilder, 2016; Sumrall et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2012). Schilder (2016) found variations were due to different licensing and credentialing standards in each state. The number, setting, expected competencies, outcomes, and supervision of classroom-based experiences differ by IHE teacher preparation programs (La Paro et al., 2018).

Clinical experiences often include hours spent in classrooms before a TC's culminating student teaching experience. Institutes of higher education use different jargon to describe their clinical experiences, such as directed teaching, practicums, or internships. During student teaching, candidates typically spend an entire semester in the same classroom taking over the role of the teacher while the teacher of record mentors the candidate. Candidates in special education (SPED) graduate programs are often the teacher of record on a provisional certificate. Thus, many graduate TCs learn to teach while on the job while their mentor has a separate class. Hiring provisional teachers is typical, given the shortage of SPED teachers in 48 states (CEC, 2022).

**Special Education Teacher Shortages**

Special education teacher shortages have been prolonged and pervasive across districts and states (Freedberg, 2018; Sindelar et al., 2012). The SPED field has reported teacher shortages since the 1960s (Ingersoll & Perda, 2010; US Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2017), and new and underprepared teachers often serve students with the most intensive needs (Freedberg & Harrington, 2017).

Attrition is high in teachers who lack preparation for teaching (Ingersoll et al., 2014; Marinell et al., 2013). Reducing attrition is one of the most significant interventions to meet the demand for SPED teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019) and could eliminate teacher shortages. Teachers who lack pedagogical training are more likely to leave after their first year than teachers who receive quality preparation (Connelly & Graham, 2009; Gray et al., 2015; Ingersoll et al., 2014).

Even though it is one of the most critical elements of teacher preparation, there is a variance in the duration of field experiences for SPED majors (Zeichner, 2010), ranging from one to multiple classroom-based experiences prior to student teaching (Bornfreund, 2011; Rice & McLaughlin, 2010). Clinical supervisors (CSs) can oversee their TCs differently, and their supervisors' qualifications vary significantly within and across IHEs (Lafferty, 2015). The variations result in differences in TCs' experiences across IHE programs.

In their literature review, Nagro and deBettencourt (2017) found a clear consensus that student teaching in SPED typically lasts one semester and ranges from 10-15 weeks. Additionally, students in pre-student teaching experiences ranged from six classroom hours to two full days per week for 14 weeks, which equals approximately 200 hours (Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017). In 2002, Prater and Sileo conducted a meta-analysis that included the number of contact hours required for preservice teaching in SPED. Ninety-one IHEs averaged 163 contact hours with 3.5 supervisor visits during pre-student teaching and 457 hours with 6.5 supervised observations during student teaching.

**Purpose**

Even with the requirements for IHEs to provide adequate field experiences for preservice SPED teachers, there is little empirical research on the characteristics and number of hours preservice teachers spend in their placements. Nagro and deBettencourt (2017) reviewed the literature on the characteristics (i.e., placement types, extent, framework, activities, and methods for guiding and assessing) of field placements. They found there is a demand for more information about the characteristics. Specifically, there is a need to understand current practices in SPED (Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017). Given the research on SPED teacher shortages and the variability of field experiences, it stands to reason that the characteristics and hours of SPED field experiences across the US are essential to understand. This study focused on field experiences in SPED teacher preparation and used a survey to determine the characteristics and hours of field experiences of programs across the US. The target population was faculty at IHEs with SPED initial preparation programs (i.e., Bachelor of Science in Education; BSED and Master of Art in Teaching; MAT). The researchers surveyed IHE SPED faculty to determine the characteristics and TCs' hours of field placement in both programs.

## Method

The study's purpose is to understand SPED field experiences to prepare candidates better, consider implications for teacher preparation programs, and future research. Specifically, the study determined the characteristics and the number of hours SPED TCs spend in their field experiences at universities across the US. The research questions (RQ) that guided the study were:

1. What are the characteristics of the field placement experiences in initial preparation SPED programs?
2. How many hours do preservice teachers spend in their field experiences across the US?

To answer the research questions, the researchers used a convenience sample with single survey administration, in which data were collected anonymously from across the US.

### Participants

The population was drawn from SPED faculty from IHEs from across the nation. The researchers sent anonymous questionnaires by email and social media resulting in an unknown population. As a result, the researchers did not calculate the total return rate. The survey population was recruited by posting the anonymous questionnaire on Teacher Education Division (TED) CEC Facebook Groups and emailing program faculty from at least two IHEs with a SPED initial certification program in each state ($N$ = 100). The researchers did not provide incentives to complete the survey. As a result of accepting all participant information without randomization, the researchers used convenience sampling techniques.

All participants ($N$ = 42) consented to the study and stated they were faculty at a public or private university or college offering SPED field experiences. Twenty-three respondents accessed the survey from social media, and 19 responded to the email requests. Next, the survey asked for the names of their universities. All the participants who answered the question ($n$ = 34) provided different universities, except two stated the same university. Further analysis revealed that one of the responses was from the university's BSED program, and the other was from the MAT program. Consequently, the data were not duplicated. The 34 respondents to survey question four came from 18 states, with Florida ($n$ = 5) and Georgia ($n$ = 3) representing 19% of the 42 participants.

**Demographics**

Demographics were calculated, and 88% of the participants who answered the question (*n* = 40) identified as white (*n* = 35), 5% were Asian (*n* = 2), 3% (*n* = 1) as black, and 5% stated other (*n* = 2). Additionally, only one participant (3%) stated they were Spanish, Hispanic, or Latinx. Over 87% of the participants who answered the survey question on gender (*n* = 40) were female (*n* = 35), and 13% were male (*n* = 5). The same participants (*n* = 40) primarily had doctorate degrees (*n* = 35, 88%), and five had master's degrees (13%). Participants' ages ranged from 31 to 70 years old. In summary, the participants were primarily white, female, and had doctorate degrees. The US demographics of SPED faculty are not known. However, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017) reported that 49% of the faculty across all institutions were female, and 23% were not white.

**Instrument**

The questions were developed by examining variables identified in the literature about field placements. Next, the author drew from more than 15 years of experience in SPED and six years at two different IHEs with SPED initial certification programs. After the author's review, experts in survey development and SPED field placements examined, pilot tested, and provided feedback on the clarity of the items and the time it took to complete the questionnaire.

**Content and Face Validity**

The researchers used content validity to measure variables of interest (Kerlinger, 1986) which measures the appropriate sampling of questionnaire items and determines the degree the instrument covers the content it is supposed to measure (Bush, 1985). Additionally, it measures the comprehensiveness and representation of a scale (Yaghmaie, 2003). The researchers used guidelines Dillman and colleagues (2014) provided to measure content validity. The guidelines include (a) making sure the question applies to the respondent, (b) making sure the question is technically accurate, (c) asking one question at a time, (d) using simple and familiar words, (e) using specific and concrete words to specify the concepts clearly, (f) use as few words as possible to post the questions, (g) use complete sentences with simple sentence structures, (h) make sure "yes" means yes and "no" means no, and (i) be sure the question specifies the response task. These guidelines were followed and then examined by

experts in the field of SPED for construct validity. All experts agreed that the questions were relevant to the research questions.

**Construct Validity**

The definition of construct validity is "the degree to which a test measures what it claims, or purports, to be measuring (Brown, 1996, p. 231). The researchers examined the constructs of the characteristics and number of hours of field placements and developed the survey to include items related to each construct. Experts in the field of SPED validated the questions and determined that the researchers addressed the constructs in the questions.

Based on expert feedback, the researchers identified the primary predictor variables and constructs as characteristics and hours of field placements at IHE with SPED programs. The characteristics and hours of field placements are determined by survey questions (SQ) 4 through 24. Fourteen of the questions offered open-ended responses after selecting "other." The incorporation of open-ended questions allows for richer, clarifying data collection.

**Reliability**

The researchers evaluated the survey reliability using Dillman and colleagues (2014) guidelines. Reliability refers to the consistency in responses across different respondents. The Qualtrics survey consisted of 29 questions. The first question the researchers evaluated was: Q5. Are you required by your state certification body to place students by grade band levels (i.e., k-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12)? Responses included: (a) yes, please type in grade band levels, (b) no, and (c) other. For other, participants were able to write a response. The demographics selected for reliability was Q3. What is the name of your university? The researchers evaluated the participants' responses from Georgia ($n$ = 3) and Florida ($n$ = 5) for reliability. Internal consistency for Georgia was 100%. All three respondents selected yes and typed in k-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. The internal consistency for Florida was 60%. Three of the respondents selected yes and typed in k-12. Two respondents said no. The mean internal consistency for Florida and Georgia was 75%. Results from participants with similar demographics were compared and found to be acceptable, thus confirming the reliability of the survey (George & Mallery, 2003).

**Design**

The researchers used an exploratory, quasi-experimental design in the current study. Additionally, the researchers used a convenience sample with single survey administration. The literature stated there is variability in SPED field experiences. The purpose was to determine the characteristics and number of hours of field placements for SPED TCs.

**Procedures**

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, a Qualtrics survey was developed and sent to experts in the field of SPED initial preparation programs to determine the validity of the survey. Experts gave feedback on the clarity and coverage of the survey. The researchers posted the revised anonymous survey on social media used by SPED IHE faculty during September and October 2018. The platform used was Facebook, and the targeted groups were the TED-CEC and Early Career Group of TED-CEC. Next, the researchers identified two colleges of education with initial preparation SPED programs per state across the US through website searches. One faculty member from each college was emailed the link to the anonymous survey to collect data from various programs. The researchers did not email more faculty from each university to control for duplicate data from the same university.

## Results

The researchers analyzed the survey data quantitatively using descriptive statistics to determine the characteristics and hours of the initial preparation SPED clinical experience programs across the US. After collecting data, the researchers imported the responses into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for descriptive computations. The author did not perform hypothesis testing in this exploratory study; therefore, no power analysis was computed. The results of this study cannot be generalized beyond the participants used in the sample.

The researchers analyzed the data for descriptive statistics and the mean number of hours for field placements. Survey questions (SQ) 4-24, excluding SQ11, were analyzed to answer RQ1 about the characteristics of field placements, and SQ11 was analyzed to determine the average number of hours of field placements across the US.

**Research Question One (RQ1)**

"What are the characteristics of the field placement experiences in initial preparation SPED programs?" The researchers analyzed the survey data by descriptive statistics and qualitatively for themes in the open-ended responses to answer RQ1. Table 1 provides an overview of the responses.

**Table 1**
Field Placement Survey Responses

| Question | Yes | | No | | Other | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| Grade band placement required | 24 | 57 | 17 | 40 | 0 | 0 |
| Field experiences embedded in course prior to student teaching | 16 | 38 | 18 | 43 | 8 | 19 |
| Students placed with one CS during a semester | 34 | 81 | 5 | 12 | 3 | 7 |
| Year-long placements | 17 | 41 | 21 | 50 | 4 | 10 |
| Field placement associated with a specific course | 26 | 62 | 15 | 16 | 0 | 0 |
| Placed in pairs prior to student teaching | 6 | 14 | 30 | 71 | 6 | 14 |
| University supervision in placements prior to student teaching | 33 | 79 | 6 | 14 | 0 | 0 |

The SPED programs represented in the study were drawn from undergraduate and graduate programs. The largest percentage was BSED, where 55% (*n* = 23) of the respondents chose either BSED or dual certification BSED. Graduate programs represented 45% (*n* = 19) of the participants and included MAT, dual certification MAT programs, or MEd initial certification programs.

When asked if the participant's university places candidates with one CS over an entire semester, 7% (*n* = 3) selected "other." Participants who wrote a response said "geographical limitations" prevented them from placing candidates with one CS per semester, "most students in my program are teaching (on waivers)," and "year-long placements." The questionnaire asked participants if their program participates in year-long placements, and 10% (*n* = 4) selected "other." The statements in "other" included "they don't stay with the same supervisor BUT they can stay with the same CO-Op," "We have an internship program in which teacher candidates can be employed by districts with restricted license after completing 75% of coursework. This is a yearlong placement," and "Year program but could be a different supervisor."

When asked if they placed candidates in pairs prior to student teaching, over 14% (*n* = 6) stated "other" and wrote, "Both. We have multiple field experiences: 1 individual, 1 coteaching, 1 could be individual or with partner", "Sometimes, depends on the size of the class," "We use a residency model with partnering schools, so students are most often in cohorts," and "When needed due to limited placements available in our rural locale." Participants were asked about the responsibilities of their candidates by placement or semester. In placement one, most participants said their candidates observed and assisted. In placement two, most participants stated that candidates assisted, planned, and taught their own lesson plans and observed. In placements three and four, most participants stated that candidates planned and taught their own lesson plans.

The next question on the survey asked about the responsibilities of the university supervisor (US), also known as university coordinators, before and during student teaching. Prior to student teaching, most participants (*n* = 35) stated the USs observe (97%), collaborate with the CS (97%), provide feedback to the candidate (94%), review lesson plans (91%), conduct seminars (83%), provide interventions (77%), and grade assignments (63%). All participants (100%) stated that USs observe and provide feedback during student teaching. Most participants stated that USs collaborate with the CS (93%), review lesson plans (90%), provide interventions (86%), and grade assignments (71%). Only half of the participants said USs conduct orientations and seminars during student teaching.

Next, the survey asked respondents how many candidates USs had on their caseload prior to student teaching. Of the 35 responses, participants stated a mean of 9.5 candidates with a range of 0-20. They also were asked the same question but about ST. The results of the 41 participants were a mean of 6.5 candidates with a range of 2-20. Also, the survey asked about the roles of the CS prior to and during student teaching. Before student teaching, participants (*n* = 40) stated CS's mentor and guide candidates.

Prior to ST, most participants stated that the CS's mentor/guide (90%) reviewed and approved lesson plans (85%), collaborated with the US (85%), reviewed policies and procedures (83%), and provided feedback on lesson plans (83%). During ST, most participants stated that

CS's mentor/guide (98%) provided feedback on lesson plans (98%), collaborated with the US (95%), reviewed policies and procedures (85%), and conducted formal evaluations (85%).

Next, participants were asked, "What percentage of university supervisors are full or part-time faculty (i.e., eligible for benefits, not adjuncts) of your university?" Results showed that 35% of the respondents stated that less than 25% of their USs were full or part-time faculty, which means 75% of these respondents' USs were adjuncts or doctoral students. Conversely, 40% of the respondents (*n* = 8) stated that all or most (greater than 75%, *n* = 8) are full or part-time faculty. Approximately 15% (*n* = 6) selected 25-50%. Faculty who selected other wrote, "Student teaching is supervised by adjuncts, every other placement is supervised by full-time faculty" and "As the program coordinator, I supervise all internships with doctoral student support."

Participants were also asked, "What level of education is required to be hired as a university supervisor for your program?". Most participants selected master's degrees (85%). Specifically, 46% (*n* = 19) selected masters in SPED, and 37% selected masters in any education field (*n* = 15). Approximately 20% (*n* = 8) selected a doctorate in SPED, and 9% selected a bachelor's in SPED or another education field. Lastly, 10% selected "other." Two participants wrote: "3 years of teaching experience" and "Most of our US are doc students." The survey also asked, "What is the level of education of most of your university supervisors (coordinators) for your program?". Over 75% (*n* = 31) stated that most USs have master's degrees.

The questionnaire asked participants if their CSs or mentor teachers were compensated for hosting candidates. The results were that half of the respondents stated that their CS was compensated with stipends or credit hours. The participants who typed "Other" stated "stipend only for mentors of student teachers" and "their district decided voucher or stipend, but the stipend does NOT go to the teacher but to the building for the teacher to get materials for their classroom."

To answer research question two, participants were asked, "How many hours do preservice teachers spend in their field experiences across the US?" Table 2 displays the number of responses and mean hours by placement or semester for BSED only. The researchers chose to exclude MAT responses in the analyses for two reasons. First, most MAT programs are

typically two years long, while traditional BSED programs are four years which skewed the data by placement. For example, a faculty member inputting data for their BSED program would type in an average of four placements (representing four semesters), with the last placement being student teaching because the program places students in their junior and senior years. While MAT programs most likely place only two semesters. Second, the number of responses for the MAT program (*N* = 7) was low. Due to the variability in the number of hours based on program type, the data displayed in Table 2 represents hours of field placement in BSED programs only.

## Discussion and Implications

Special education has reported teacher shortages since the 1960s (Ingersoll & Perda, 2010; US Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2017), and teachers who lack pedagogical training are up to three times more likely to leave after their first year than teachers who receive quality preparation (Gray et al., 2015; Ingersoll et al., 2014). To better understand the preparation TCs are receiving, the current study focused on the characteristics and intensity of field placements of SPED candidates across the US.

**Table 2**

*Responses and Mean Hours for BSED by Placement (N = 22)*

| Placement Semester | *n* | *M* | *SD* | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 22 | 54 | 43 | 10 | 155 |
| 2 | 22 | 73 | 61 | 10 | 299 |
| 3 | 18 | 170 | 198 | 10 | 800 |
| 4 | 14 | 204 | 207 | 41 | 800 |
| 5 | 8 | 186 | 188 | 28 | 600 |
| 6 | 2 | 350 | 410 | 60 | 640 |

Institutes of higher education prepare teachers, and the intensity of field experiences can vary within and across states (La Paro et al., 2014; NRC, 2015; Schilder, 2016; Sumrall et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2012). The number, setting, expected competencies, outcomes, and supervision of classroom-based experiences differ by IHE teacher preparation programs (La

Paro et al., 2018). The variability in practicum experiences for all majors ranges from one to multiple classroom-based experiences prior to student teaching (Bornfreund, 2011; Rice & McLaughlin, 2010). Supervisors guide TCs differently, and their qualifications vary significantly within and across IHEs (Lafferty, 2015). This study also found that the number of hours and characteristics of the field placements varied widely among the represented states and IHEs.

All states have teacher education certification requirements, including field experiences guided by a mentor teacher or CS. The same is true for SPED majors at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. However, prior meta-analyses on SPED field experiences show a variance in the characteristics and number of hours SPED TCs spend in their field placements (Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017; Prater & Sileo, 2002). Furthermore, both studies showed a need for more information on the clinical experiences of SPED TCs in IHE initial preparation programs.

As a result of the need for more information on the characteristics and hours of field experiences in SPED, the researchers conducted this current exploratory study through a single survey and convenient sample administration. While 61 participants consented to the study, only an average of 40 participants (range of 34-42) answered most of the survey questions. It is unknown why the other 12 participants who consented did not participate any further, and this is surprising given that the researchers emailed the survey to over 100 faculty members at 50 different IHEs that offer SPED initial preparation programs. The Qualtrics-generated email could have gone into the faculty members' spam folder, and the researchers did not send follow-up emails. Another limitation of the study was the time of year, and the survey was sent early in the semester when faculty are typically busy planning.

Of the 42 participants, only 34 gave the name of their university. The survey asked for the university name, so duplicate responses from the same universities could be analyzed and removed from the data if necessary. The implications are that eight participants did not provide their university; thus, some data could be duplicated. The researchers chose to include the data from the eight because of the low number of participants. Consequently, the study's results should be read cautiously due to the possibility of duplicate responses from the same university programs, which is a limitation.

Even though the researchers targeted two universities in all 50 states, several states were represented more than two times in the study after analyzing the names of the universities. Analyses showed that five universities were in Florida and three in Georgia. More than two universities from a few states resulted from the anonymous social media link. A higher representation from Florida and Georgia could result from the authors being from the Southeast US. Implications are that the results are weighted toward the IHEs in the Southeast US, and other parts of the US are not well-represented in the data. The demographics of the participants showed they were primarily white, non-Hispanic, females with doctorate degrees. Because National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017) reported that 49% of the faculty across all institutions were female and 23% were not white, the demographics of this exploratory study do not represent the faculty of higher education as of 2017. However, it may be more representative of SPED faculty.

To answer research question one, "What are the characteristics of the field placement experiences in initial preparation SPED programs?" the researchers analyzed data from SQs 4-24. Most of the responses from participants (47%) were from BSED SPED programs. As a result, most of the data represented in this study are from BSED SPED programs. The implications are that the results will be heavily weighted toward initial undergraduate certification programs.

The following characteristic studied was whether states required program placement in grade band levels. Of the 42 respondents, 57% said "yes," and 40% said "no." If participants selected "yes," they were prompted to write in the grade band levels. Twenty-three responded, and six participants stated the same two-grade band levels. The other 10 had different requirements by their state. Only two respondents did not report grade band levels that went up to 12th grade. As a result, it could be assumed that those two responses were for dual-certification elementary programs. The data collected from this survey question indicates the variability between states. Indeed, states require field placements in SPED initial certification programs in various placement options. Implications are that graduates from different states have different grade level experiences depending on their state teacher licensing requirements. Additionally, it is unknown what the placement requirements are for the 17 respondents who said their state does not require grade band level placements. Implications of state variability in

grade band placements could be a reason for SPED teacher attrition and should be studied further.

Next, the researchers analyzed whether courses embedded SPED field placements, and 43% of the participants who answered the question stated “no,” while 38% stated “yes.” Implications are that some candidates in SPED initial preparation programs pay separate tuition for their field hours which makes sense because IHEs use the tuition to pay for the US to mentor the candidate. Candidates with placements embedded in a course likely do not pay separate tuition and are not provided with as much content or supervision as the course instructor tries to manage the workload of teaching and supervising.

The researchers asked several survey questions to determine the qualifications of the US. Survey question 17 asked participants what percentage of their USs are full or part-time faculty. Results vary, but most participants (34%) indicated that less than 25% of their USs were full or part-time faculty. The next question (SQ18) asked what level of education is required to be a US at the participant’s IHE. Results indicate that most participants (46%) selected a master’s degree in SPED, while 37% stated USs could have a masters in any education field. Implications are that USs who do not have an advanced SPED degree could contribute to the attrition of SPED teachers after their first year of teaching. University supervisors who are not SPED experts may not be providing guidance in high-leverage and evidence-based practices in SPED, thus not preparing their candidates effectively to make it through the rigorous first year of teaching.

To learn more about the US in SPED, SQ19 asked what the education of level of most of their USs. Results indicate that most participants (49%) selected a master’s in SPED, and 34% selected a doctorate in SPED. The results of the qualifications of the USs are that most IHEs require a master’s degree in SPED to supervise candidates in their field placements. However, many of them are not considered full or part-time faculty. The implications are that adjuncts supervise many candidates, presumably retired SPED teachers with master’s degrees in SPED, or as one respondent stated, they could be doctoral students who would have master’s degrees in SPED while supervising for their IHE. The selection of doctorate (34%) in the education level of current US is assumed to be full-time faculty who also act as US in their IHEs.

Since researchers know little about US roles and responsibilities in SPED field placements, SQ13 asked if candidates in placements prior to student teachers are assigned a US. Over 79% of the participants selected “yes.” The specific responsibilities of the US prior to and during student teaching at the participant’s IHEs were collected. Results show that the primary responsibility of most US is to observe the candidate (97%) and collaborate with the CS (97%) prior to student teaching and observe the candidate (100%) and provide feedback to the candidate (100%) during student teaching. Additionally, the respondents stated that the US at their IHEs provided feedback and reviewed candidate lesson plans (LPs) prior to (*n* = 32) and during student teaching (*n* = 38). Implications are that the US at most of the IHEs represented in this survey observed candidates in their placements and collaborated with the CS to mentor the candidate before student teaching, while more USs reviewed LPs during student teaching. University supervisors during both placements provided feedback on the observations and LPs. There was consistency in answers across respondents. Nagro and deBettencourt (2017) described the confusion in some responses to terms used to describe various field experiences across the US. Specifically, the field of SPED needs a precise method for defining the characteristics of field experiences (Sindelar et al., 2010).

Survey question nine asked if the placements were associated with a specific course, and most participants (62%) said “yes.” The respondents stated that course instructors with embedded field placements before student teaching were responsible for teaching and supervising candidates. The courses could be methods courses for the specific grade levels required by the state certification agency mentioned previously. Implications are costs to the student and the instructor's workload because the student only pays tuition for the course and is charged tuition for another course if the placement is a stand-alone course. It would make sense that more supervision is provided in stand-alone courses to provide a more rigorous experience for the TCs. Implications are that TCs in stand-alone supervision courses pre-student teaching could be better prepared and less likely to leave the profession. To determine candidate field placement before student teaching, SQ9 asked if candidates were placed in pairs. Over 71% of the respondents selected “no.” The implications are that most of the faculty

who responded to this survey stated their TCs go to their placements alone, and the CSs are only responsible for mentoring one candidate at a time.

Clinical supervisors are critical to field placements in teacher preparation programs, and these mentor teachers typically open their classrooms to the candidates. Research is dearth about the role of a SPED CS. As a result, the researchers provided several survey questions about the roles and responsibilities of the CSs in SPED. First, the survey asked respondents if placements typically had one CS over an entire semester. Most respondents (81%) stated "yes." Implications are that the grade band level placements from the previous question are probably by semester and not within semesters since most CSs teach within one-grade band level (i.e., K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12).

The questionnaire asked participants to respond to different roles before and during student teaching. Results indicated that prior to student teaching, the primary role of the CS is to "mentor and guide" the candidate (90%). Next, respondents selected "review and approve LPs" (85%) and "collaborate with the US" (85%). Additionally, participants were asked if their CSs were compensated during four different placements. During placement one, 46% stated "yes," with most receiving a stipend versus free credit hours at the IHE. In placement two, 41% selected "yes," with most receiving a stipend. In the third placement, 32% stated they primarily compensate with a stipend. Placement four results indicated that 32% were not receiving compensation, while in placement five, 67% of the 12 respondents said their CSs received a stipend. Implications are that CSs are more likely to be compensated during the last placement, presumably supervising student teachers, than in earlier pre-student teaching placements.

During student teaching, IHEs expect CSs to mentor and guide (98%) and provide feedback on LPs (98%), as well as collaborate with the US (95%) and review and approve LPs (93%). Implications of the results show that the responsibilities of the CSs increase during student teaching, which makes sense since student teaching is the TCs' culminating experience, and the experience is more rigorous the candidate for the classroom.

Most SPED candidates have field placements by grade band level and semester up to student teaching. Due to the lack of research on candidates' responsibilities during their placements, the survey asked about the typical candidate responsibilities at the different

placement levels. It is not surprising that most candidates observe (95%) and assist (77%) in their first placement; assist (82%), plan, and teach their own lessons (74%) in their second placement; plan and teach their own lessons and assist in their third and fourth placements. While it might be surprising that 15% of the respondents said their candidates plan and teach three and five-day units in their first placements, those could be teachers of record districts hired to provisionally teach SPED while earning their degrees or undergraduates who have completed 75% of their coursework as indicated by a participant in SQ8.

Research question two was analyzed by placement and displayed in Table 2. Results showed that the mean hours for BSED programs increased from 54 to 350 hours through the fifth placement. The number of participants who answered the question by placements decreased from 22 for placement one to only 2 for placement six. The implications are that most (*n* = 14) of the participant's BSED SPED programs do not offer more than four different placements. It makes sense that the number of hours in placements increases as the candidates gain more experience. Indeed, extended field experiences offer more opportunities for candidates to question and experiment in real-world situations (Sileo, Prater, Luckner, Rhine & Rude, 1998) and are expected to become more rigorous (CAEP, 2019).

In conclusion, the results of this exploratory study provided some characteristics from approximately 42 IHEs across 18 states. However, it also revealed that there is still a lack of information and defining characteristics of SPED field experiences and the use of terminology. There was variability in the results, as expected and mentioned in the literature (McCall et al., 2014; Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017; Sindelar et al., 2010). Different states have different licensing and grade band level requirements which impacted the variability of the data and the number of placements in which candidates participate. Terminology to describe a field experience and the people who supervise differed among participants. A surprising study result is the use of part-time staff to supervise candidates. Teacher preparation programs typically hire part-time staff as adjuncts on a contractual basis. Using adjuncts to supervise candidates during their SPED field placements could impact the quality of experiences they receive. It is also concerning that many USs do not need master's degrees in SPED because they may not fully understand SPED and its associated laws. While many USs review LPs, observe candidates

and provide feedback, only a third grade assignments. The implication is that many USs do not provide grades for candidates' LPs, performance during observations, and use of feedback to change behaviors. Another surprise was the lack of compensation for CSs, meaning only about half of the mentor teachers are compensated for hosting and/or mentoring a candidate.

The number of hours BSED candidates spend in placements before student teaching averaged 100 hours for the first three placements compared to the 163 contact hours found by Prater and Sileo in their 2002 meta-analysis. Furthermore, Stein and Stein (2016) stated that candidates should spend 500-600 hours in classrooms prior to student teaching. During student teaching, presumed to be the fourth placement in this study, the results were a mean of 204 hours in placement. This result varies widely from Prater and Silo's 2002 meta-analysis, which found an average of 457 hours spent in the field during student teaching. As a result, IHEs could send new teachers into the workforce without enough hours to become proficient SPED teachers, thus adding to attrition and shortages.

**Limitations**

As with any study, limitations arise that affect the research outcome. The first limitation is the sample size of the study. Even though the researchers attempted to contact faculty from two IHEs with SPED initial preparation in every state, the sample was only 42 participants from 18 states. Furthermore, the participants' demographics were homogeneous, and the demographics of SPED faculty from IHEs are unknown. Several participants in the study did not name their universities. As a result, the researchers could not determine if all the responses were from different universities.

Another limitation of the study is the type of programs represented. Due to the low sample size, the researchers did not analyze the data by program type, and thus, the results could be skewed depending on the program, especially between graduate and undergraduate programs. It appears many of the graduate programs consisted of candidates who were teachers of record, and their field placements were different from traditional TC field placements. It is a limitation that the survey did not include the number of US observations. As a result, future research should address all limitations.

Lastly, it is a limitation that the researchers did not delineate the number of field placement hours before and during student teaching. As a result, it is difficult to determine the number of hours participants stated during each type of field placement. Future information should be gathered by the type of students' field experience rather than by semester.

**Future Research**

Since the sample size was a limitation of this study, future research should look at a larger sample of faculty in IHE SPED initial certification programs to represent more states and institutions. The researchers should send follow-up emails, phone calls, or letters to address the possibility that the original email went to spam. Future research should also determine faculty demographics in IHE's Colleges of Education and SPED programs to determine the population and attempt to recruit faculty who match the population's demographics.

Additional future research includes disaggregating all the data by MAT and BSED programs. Within the MAT program, researchers should determine teachers of record and collect and analyze their data to find the differences between field placements. The next iteration of the survey should include the number and type of visits USs make when observing candidates, a characteristic studied by Prater & Sileo (2002). Future research could also include candidates' outcomes, for example, edTPA results by IHE, certification pass rates, or graduation rates. Additionally, future researchers should add focus groups and randomly select participants for follow-up discussions to obtain richer information. Accreditation information could be requested and analyzed to determine outcomes. The data in this survey only addressed faculty at IHEs. Future research should consider the candidate's experience, their success in their field placements, and as a teacher, which could prove valuable to all IHEs who have initial preparation SPED programs. Lastly, researchers could determine SPED teacher shortages and attrition by collecting data about field experiences from current and former SPED teachers.

**Conclusion**

It is well known that there is a SPED teacher shortage across the US, and SPED teacher attrition is the primary reason for the shortage. Research shows variability in the characteristics and number of hours of field placements, which could contribute to the attrition. Consequently,

the researchers collected data about the characteristics and number of hours from SPED faculty at IHEs nationwide. This study showed variability across the US on the characteristics and number of hours of field experiences. More research is needed to determine if the variability in SPED TC field experiences contributes to SPED teacher attrition.

**References**

Baum, A. C., & Korth, B. B. (2013). Preparing classroom teachers to be cooperating teachers: A report of current efforts, beliefs, challenges, and associated recommendations. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 34*(2), 171-190. https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2013.787478

Bornfreund, L. A. (2011). Getting in sync: Revamping licensing and preparation for teachers in pre-k, kindergarten, and the early grades. Education Policy Program: New America Foundation.

Brown, J. D. (1996). *Testing in language programs.* Prentice Hall Regents.

Bush, C. T. (1985). *Nursing research principles and methods* (4th ed.). JB Lippincott Company.

CAEP (2019). Standard 2: Clinical partnerships and practice. http://caepnet.org/standards/standard-2

Connelly, V., & Graham, S. (2009). Student teaching and teacher attrition in special education. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 32,* 257-269. https://doi.org/10.1177/08884064093394

Council for Exceptional Children (2022). *Shortages of special education teachers and early intervention providers issue brief.* Council for Exceptional Children. https://specialeducationlegislativesummit.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/EducatorShortages%20Brief_2022_v2.pdf

Council for Exceptional Children (2015). *What every special educator must know* (7th ed.). Author.

Dillman, D. A., Smyth, J. D., & Christian, L. M. (2014). *Internet, phone, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: The tailored design method* (4th ed.). John Wiley.

Freedberg, L. (2018). Teacher shortages persist in California and getting worse in many communities. https://edsource.org/2018/teacher-shortages-persist-in-california-and-getting-worse-in-many-communities/593853

Freedberg, L., & Harrington, T. (2017). *Special education in "deep trouble" and still needs reform, says California ed board president*. https://edsource.org/2017/california-education-board-president-says-special-ed-in-deep-trouble-and-needs-reform/588436

George, D., & Mallery, P. (2003). *SPSS for Windows step by step: A simple guide and reference. 11.0 update* (4th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.

Gray, L., Taie, S., & O'Rear, I. (2015*). Public school teacher attrition and mobility in the first five years: Results from the first through fifth waves of the 2007-2008 beginning teacher longitudinal study.* US Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015337.pdf

Ingersoll, R., Merrill, L, & Stuckey, D. (2014). *Seven trends: The transformation of the teaching force.* CPRE Report (RR-80). Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania. https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_researchreports/108

Ingersoll, R. M., & Perda, D. (2010). Is the supply of mathematics and science teachers sufficient? *American Educational Research Journal, 43*(3), 563-594. https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1229&context=gse_pubs

Kerlinger, F. N. (1986). *Foundations of behavioral research* (3rd ed.). CBS Publishing.

La Paro, K. M., Scott-Little, C., Ejimofor, A., Sumrall, T., Kintner-Duffy, V. L., Pianta, R. C., Burchinal, M., Hamre, B., Downer, J., & Howes, C. (2014). Student teaching feedback and

evaluation: Results from a seven-state survey. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 35*(4), 318-336. https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2014.968297

La Paro, K. M., Van Schagen, A., King, E., & Lippard, C. (2018). A systems perspective on practicum experiences in early childhood teacher education: Focus on interprofessional relationships. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 46*(4), 365-375. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0872-8

Lafferty, K. E. (2015). *Practices of cooperating teachers contributing to a high quality field experience.* (Publication No. 10019619). [Doctoral dissertation, San Diego University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1768250197

Marinell, W. H., Coca, V. M., Arum, R., Goldstein, J., Kemple, J., Pallas, A., Bristol, T., Buckley, C., Scallon, A., & Tanner, B. (2013). *Who stays and who leaves? Findings from a three-part study of teacher turnover in NYC middle schools.* Research Alliance for New York Schools. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED540818.pdf

McCall, Z., McHatton, P. A., & Shealey, M. W. (2014). Special education teacher candidate assessment: A review. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 37*, 51-70. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406413512684

Nagro, S. A., & deBettencourt, S. U. (2017). Reviewing special education teacher preparation field experience placement, activities, and research, *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 7-33. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1148920.pdf

National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. (NCATE; 2010). *Transforming teacher education through clinical practice: A national strategy to prepare effective teachers.* National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education. https://caepnet.org/~/media/Files/caep/accreditation-resources/blue-ribbon-panel.pdf

National Research Council. (NRC; 2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation.* The National Academies Press.

National Research Council (2001). Testing teacher candidates: The role of licensure test in improving teacher quality. The National Academies Press.

Prater, M. A., & Sileo, T. W. (2002). School-University partnerships in special education field experiences. *Remedial and Special Education 6*(23), 325-348. https://doi.org/10.1177/074193250202300603

Retallick, M. S., & Miller, G. (2010). Teacher preparation in career and technical education. A model for developing and researching early field experiences. *Journal of Career and Technical Education, 25*(1), 62-74. http://doi.org/10.21061/jcte.v25i1.469

Rice, C., & McLaughlin, J. (2010). Providing tools toward quality: The status of P-3 teacher preparation programs in New Jersey. *Policy Brief.* Association for Children of New Jersey. https://www.fcd-us.org/providing-tools-towards-quality-the-status-of-p-3-teacher-preparation-programs-in-new-jersey/

Schilder, D. (2016). *Early childhood teacher education policies: Research review and state trends* (Policy Report). Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes. https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/ceelo_policy_report_ec_teach_education_policies_final_for_web_2016_04.pdf

Sileo, T. W., Prater, M. A., Luckner, J. L., Rhine, B., & Rude, H. A. (1998). Strategies to facilitate preservice teachers' involvement in learning. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 21,* 187-204. https://doi.org/10.1177/088840649802100304

Sindelar, P. T., Brownell, M. T., & Billingsley, B. (2010). Special education teacher education research: Current status and future directions. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 33,* 8-24. https://doi.org/10.1177/088840640935859

Sindelar, P. T., Dewey, J. F., Rosenberg, M. S., Corbett, N. L., Denslow, D., & Lotfinia, B. (2012). Cost effectiveness of alternative route special education teacher preparation. *Exceptional Children, 79*(1), 25-42. http://www.cec.sped.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Publications1

Singh, D. K. (2017). Role of clinical practice in teacher preparation: Perceptions of elementary teacher candidates, *Education, 2*(138), 179-189. http://www.projectinnovation.biz/education.html

Stein, L., & Stein, A. (2016). Re-thinking America's teacher education programs. *The Clearing House, 6*(89), 191-196. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2016.1206427

Sumrall, T. C., Scott-Little, C., La Paro, K. M., Pianta, R. C., Burchinal, M., Hamre, B., Downer, J., & Howes, C. (2016). Student teaching within early childhood teacher preparation programs: An examination of key features across 2- and 4-year institutions. *Early Childhood Education Journal,* 1-10. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10643-016-0830-x

Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2019). Understanding teacher shortages: An analysis of teacher supply and demand in the United States. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 27*(35), 1-40. https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3696

US Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. (2017). *Teacher shortage areas nationwide listings 1990-1991 through 2017-2018.* US Department of Education. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/pol/ateachershortageareasreport2017-18.pdf

Whitebook, M., Austin, L. J., Ryan, S., Kipnis, F., Almaraz, M., & Sakai, L. (2012). By default or by design? Variations in higher education programs for early care and education teachers and their implications for research methodology, policy, and practice. Report. *Center for the study of Child Care Employment, University of California at Berkeley.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED543257.pdf

Yaghmaie, F. (2003). Content validity and its estimation. *Journal of Medical Education, 3*(1), 25-27. https://doi.org/10.22037/jme.v3i1.870.

Zeichner, K. (2010). Competition, economic rationalization, increased surveillance, and attacks on diversity: Neo-liberalism and the transformation of teacher education in the US. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26*(8), 1544-1552. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.06.004