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# The Role of the Special Educator in Pennsylvania: Expectations and Experiences

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THE ROLE OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATOR IN PENNSYLVANIA: EXPECTATIONS AND  
EXPERIENCES

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Education

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
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Title: The Role of the Special Educator in Pennsylvania: Expectations and Experiences

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Recent changes to special education law and teacher certification requirements have become a catalyst for a change in the role of special educators in today's schools. IDEA 2004 directly defines the "highly qualified teacher" as one who is "appropriately and adequately prepared and trained" and has "the content knowledge and skills to serve children with disabilities."

This study asked several questions that investigate how special educators in the state of Pennsylvania define their roles in today's public schools and whether these roles meet the expectations they held prior to entering the field. The author provides results from forced-choice and open-ended survey questions along with implications and suggestions for further research that explores the ever-changing role of a special educator.

In this study, the role that special educators hold within a school is explored and analyzed. The results of this study offer an illustration of the current responsibilities and workload for currently employed special educators in Pennsylvania. The results of this study also suggest that the expectations that Pennsylvania special educators hold prior to entering their current positions do not match their current responsibilities and experiences.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The National Center for Education Statistics reports "about 95 percent of children and youth ages 6-21 served under IDEA in 2007-08 were enrolled in regular schools (2010)." It is therefore vital to explore the experiences and expectations of the special educators who are serving the special needs population in regular schools. The above statistic refers to the recent upsurge in the practice of inclusion, a reform in education policy mandated by the Individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA, 2004). Under inclusion, individuals with disabilities must be allowed and encouraged to learn and participate in educational activities within the least restrictive environment (LRE). Often, this means that students with disabilities are participating in general education classes alongside their non-disabled peers.

The recent trend and increase in inclusion has dramatically changed the roles and responsibilities for special education teachers. The following study aims to investigate the current roles and responsibilities for K-12 special education teachers in the state of Pennsylvania through an online survey. It is important to explore special education teachers' roles be explored for several reasons. First, the role of any teacher is highly influential in the lives of students. Whether positive or negative, the influence a teacher can exercise in the future success or failure of a student is undeniable. It is thus necessary to use the words and responses of the special educators themselves as evidence of how their job responsibilities impact their experiences and expectations of the field of special education.

Second, exploring the expectations held by these Pennsylvania special educators prior to entering the field will offer a unique insight into whether they are currently serving in the role that they had expected to fill upon entering their teaching position. Meeting, not meeting, or

exceeding expectations for items such as workload, professional collaboration, and student need, can serve to illustrate how the current experiences and responsibilities of these special educators compare with their previous expectations.

The current study will investigate these two crucial aspects of the special educators' roles within an educational setting through the following research questions: a) How do special educators define their role in today's schools? b) What are the responsibilities of special educators in today's schools? c) What expectations did special educators have about their role as a special educator prior to entering the field? d) How do current experiences of special educators compare to their initial expectations?

### **The Demand For Special Educators**

It is first relevant to note that the United States Department of Education (2010) has listed the subject area of Special Education as an area of teacher shortage for the state of Pennsylvania since 2006 and up to 2010. This indicates a significant need for teachers in this field. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) reports that employment in the field of special education is expected to increase 17% for the years of 2008-2018, a rate faster than the average for all occupations. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) sites school districts' reported "problems finding adequate numbers of licensed special education teachers" as a reason for the significant number of openings in this particular area. This significant and persistent shortage indicates that potential teachers are not choosing special education as their field of choice or currently employed special education teachers are not staying in their current positions long term

Special education teachers with three or fewer years of teaching experience were the focus of a study on teacher attrition (Connelly & Graham, 2009). The results support the need

for an intensive pre-service preparation program lasting longer than 10 weeks, with the most significant indicator being that nearly 80 percent of the teachers who reported having 10 or more weeks of student teaching were still in their teaching position a year later. Compare this to the 63 percent of teachers who reported less than 10 weeks of student teaching who were still at their job a year later, and it is apparent that adequate preparation is key to keeping special education teachers in their current position.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

Interviews with special education teachers offer insights into their reasons for leaving the field. DeMik (2008) interviewed former special education teachers and reported minimal support from other teachers and administration, administration's high expectations for paperwork and planning, and low self-efficacy due to feeling like the job "was more like being a tutor" (pg 26) as reasons for leaving the profession. DeMik (2008) also reports on former special education teachers' issues when dealing with numerous student needs and caseloads and a lack of personal lunchtime because the time allotted for lunch was used for paperwork and planning and assisting students. All respondents of the survey who left the profession mention the repetitive and overwhelming nature of the paperwork.

The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) (Carlson, Chen, Schroll, & Klein, 2003) examined the paperwork responsibilities of special educators. The study reported that typical special education teachers spend 5 hours per week completing paperwork and other administrative tasks. In detail, the study reported that typical special education teachers spend 5 hours per month on behavior logs, 2 hours per month writing behavioral intervention plans, 2 hours per month writing functional behavioral assessments, and 3 hours per month transition

planning. The special education teachers also reported spending 2 hours on each IEP.

According to the SPeNSE, in order to tackle this paperwork, the average special education teacher was given 2 days of class coverage per year and 50 minutes during each school day. It is important that pre-service teachers be prepared for the large amounts of paperwork and the daily responsibilities of the special education profession.

With reports of such large increases in job openings in the field of special education, it is necessary to examine the perceptions and experiences of pre-service teachers. There is available research on how pre-service teachers feel about inclusion (Hastings & Oakford, 2003) and how experience and contact change their perceptions of people with disabilities (Shannon, Schoen, & Tansey, 2009).

Little literature however, can be found on the expectations that pre-service teachers hold about the potential roles and responsibilities that await pre-service teachers when they enter in the field of special education. In an effort to investigate this further, research on the attitudes and concerns held by pre-service teachers was explored, in hopes of examining their expectations regarding a potential career in special education. Boyer (2004) categorized the concerns of pre-service special education teachers regarding their future responsibilities. The highest rate of expressed concern fell under the "Personal Preparation and Career Choice" category indicating that the surveyed pre-service teachers worried about their choice of career and expressed concern over their level of preparedness. This research suggests that perhaps pre-service teachers are either unaware or under-informed about what responsibilities await them in the special education field.

The nature of the work of special educators in inclusive roles is diverse. While individual responsibilities may differ, major roles begin to emerge in the literature. A special educator may

take on roles such as: developer and coordinator of student programs, designer and provider of instruction to students, and director of the work of paraprofessionals (York-Barr, Sommerness, Duke, & Ghere, 2005). Variations on these roles include: teacher of content and skills, worker for students (adaptations, accommodations, manage behavior, consulting), and professional collaborator (Wasburn-Moses, 2005).

Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, Hou, and Garvan (2009) report first-year special education teachers most often teach in urban schools where more than 50 percent of the students receive free or reduced price lunch. The majority of them teach in self-contained classrooms with mainstreaming arrangements and far fewer taught in a full inclusion setting. These first-year special educators reported that the highest percentages of their students exhibited either specific learning disabilities, behavioral disorders, or speech and language disorders. When asked to rank the biggest problems encountered during the initial year of teaching, 67 percent listed "time" as the greatest issue.

The 2003 SPeNSE report on beginning special educators with three or less years of experience found that 63 percent of special education teachers do not hold a certification for their main assignments, with 20 percent of those holding emergency certificates. The study also reports that over half of beginning teachers who work with students with Emotional Disturbance are not fully certified for the position. 29 percent of the beginning teachers in the SPeNSE study reported having problems managing the workload, mostly due to paperwork and routine duties (72 %). The report suggests enhancing the experiences of prospective teachers so that a better understanding of the range of required professional responsibilities is fostered.

The literature has shown that there is significant interest and value in the experiences of pre-service and currently employed special education teachers. Given the demands placed on

special education teachers and inclusion requirements, this study sought to better understand the current experiences of Pennsylvania special educators. The experiences of special education teachers are numerous and informative, and it is necessary to research ways that these experiences can be improved for current and future special education teachers.

## **CHAPTER II: METHODS**

### **Research Design**

A survey (Appendix A) was designed to address the research questions that guide this study. Because the sample population was currently employed K-12 special education teachers in Pennsylvania, the survey was structured to specifically address current practices in Pennsylvania.

The survey was quick and easy to complete. Out of a total of 15 questions, only one required an open response, and 4 gave the option of "other" in which respondents could type in an additional answer not presented in the answer options. Second, the survey was created in an online format using the Qualtrics survey creation program. This was done as an additional effort to increase the ease of completion of the survey for respondents. After the survey was created in the Qualtrics program and an email list was compiled using contact information listed on school districts' websites, an email was sent to the sample population. This email (Appendix B) included an introduction of the author, explanation of the research methods, a letter of informed consent, and an Internet link to follow in order to complete the survey. After allowing 7 days for responses, a reminder email was sent to those who had not responded and a thank-you email was sent to early respondents. The thank-you email contained a request by the author that interested respondents forward the email and survey link on to other currently employed K-12 special education teachers in Pennsylvania who may be interested in participating. This was done in an effort to increase sample size. A week after the first reminder and thank you emails were sent, another round of reminder emails were sent to those who had yet to respond.

Due to the desire to keep surveys both simple and anonymous, no demographic information was requested. It should also be noted that oftentimes special educators do not go by specific titles such as "history teacher", but are often referred to by many differing titles including, but not limited to: resource teacher, itinerant teacher, autism support teacher, special education teacher, learning support teacher, emotional support teacher, and life skills teacher. Thus the survey required information only about the daily responsibilities required of the teacher regardless of their title.

The online survey that was distributed contained three sections addressing the research questions. In the first section, respondents offered information pertaining to their daily responsibilities as a special educator. In answering the questions in section one, respondents indicated their current responsibilities, how much time is dedicated to these responsibilities, which responsibilities are most important, and how much time is necessary for adequate completion of the most important responsibility. For questions relating to current responsibilities, respondents had the option of the following responses: *Direct Classroom Instruction, Team-Teaching/Co-Teaching, Resource Room Instruction, Family/Parent Liaison, I.E.P. creation /maintenance, Staff Training/Professional Development, Consultation with other faculty/staff, Teacher Mentoring Program, or Other*. For questions that related to time spent on responsibilities, respondents had the option of the following responses: *0-4 hours per week, 5-9 hours per week, 10-14 hours per week, 15-20 hours per week, or more than 20 hours per week*.

In the second section, respondents offered information pertaining to the expectations they held prior to entering the field of Special Education. In answering these questions respondents indicated their expectations concerning: time spent in certain types of classrooms, collaboration from staff and administration, and levels of student need. The following responses: *More, Less,*

or *About the same amount of*, were offered as choices for questions that related to the expectations held by the respondents prior to entering the field of special education.

The third section of the survey asked special educators to respond to prompts that required the assessment and definition of aspects of their current role as a special educator in the school. In answering these questions, respondents indicated their ideas and definitions of their role as a special educator, including the challenges faced as they went about fulfilling that role. For the question relating to the respondents' own definition of their role as a special educator, there was no limit on the length of the response. For the question relating to challenges to fulfilling their defined role, respondents had the option of the following responses: *Lack of classroom resources, Lack of professional collaboration, Lack of training/professional development, Lack of adequate planning time, Inadequate classes/instruction at the college level, Lack of parent/family involvement*, or *Other* (in which respondents were able to add any challenge they felt was not available).

### **Participants and Sampling**

Participants in the research were currently employed K-12 special education teachers in Pennsylvania. There were no limitations on the participants based on gender or age. In order to obtain a large random sample of currently employed K-12 special education teachers in Pennsylvania, a group of 6 counties in the state were randomly selected from the possible 67. Fortunately, the 6 counties chosen represent a diverse area in the state of Pennsylvania: 1 western, 2 southeast, 1 northeast, and 2 from the center of the state. A total of 28 school districts were found to be in those 6 counties. Each of the districts' websites was used to obtain email addresses from any teacher listed as a special educator. This sampling generated a total of 479

email addresses. A total of 41 surveys were completed and returned for a response rate of roughly 9 percent.

### CHAPTER III: RESULTS

The first section of the online survey explored the current responsibilities of a Pennsylvania special educator. As shown in Table 1, out of the nine responsibilities of a special educator to choose from, respondents most frequently chose *Individualized Education Program (IEP) creation/maintenance*, *Consultation with other faculty/staff*, and *Direct Classroom Instruction*. Those that added an additional responsibility wrote: Transition Coordinator, Student teacher co-op teacher, Supervisor of non-certified personnel, Itinerant support services, Student Advocate, and Professional development such as data collection, and maintaining Act 48 hours.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Direct Classroom Instruction	32	78%
2	Team Teaching/ Co-Teaching	17	41%
3	Resource Room Instruction	30	73%
4	Family/Parent Liaison	24	59%
5	Administrative Duties	8	20%
6	IEP creation/maintenance	41	100%
7	Staff Training/Professional Development	17	41%
8	Consultation with other faculty/staff	39	95%
9	Teacher Mentoring Program	13	32%
10	Other	6	15%

Other

Transition Coord.

Student teacher coop teacher

Supervision of non certified personnel

ITINERANT EMOTIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES

advocating for students

Professional goals, data collection and analysis, act 48 hours professional development

Figure 1: Responsibilities of a special educator.

The second question of the section asked respondents to choose the responsibilities that take up the most of their time. As shown in Table 2, respondents most frequently chose *IEP creation/maintenance*, *Direct Classroom Instruction*, and *Resource Room Instruction*. Additional time-consuming responsibilities include: Other paperwork such as Reevaluation Reports/Evaluation Reports (RR/ER), Manifest Determinations, Functional Behavior Analysis (FBA) and data collection, Working with a student parents, lesson planning, and paperwork like IEPs.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Direct Classroom Instruction	22	54%
2	Team Teaching/ Co-Teaching	9	22%
3	Resource Room Instruction	14	34%
4	Family/Parent Liaison	1	2%
5	Administrative Duties	3	7%
6	IEP creation/maintenance	29	71%
7	Staff Training/Professional Development	1	2%
8	Consultation with other faculty/staff	12	29%
9	Teacher Mentoring Program	1	2%
10	Other	5	12%

Other  
 Other paperwork: RR/ER; Manifestation Determinations; Functional Behavior Assessments; Data collection  
 High profile parent  
 lesson planning  
 communicating to parents either giving student reports of daily behaviors or explaining things to parents  
 IEP's but paperwork in general

Figure 2: Time consuming responsibilities.

The third question asked respondents to estimate how many hours per week they spent on the responsibility that they identified as taking up the most of their time. As shown in Table 3,

respondents most frequently reported spending more than 20 hours per week on this responsibility, 10-14 hours per week, and 5-9 hours per week.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	0-4 hours per week	1	2%
2	5-9 hours per week	7	17%
3	10-14 hours per week	10	24%
4	15-20 hours per week	6	15%
5	more than 20 hours per week	17	41%
	Total	41	100%

Figure 3: Time spent on most time consuming responsibility.

The fourth question of this section addressed the responsibilities that respondents felt were the most important. As shown in Table 4, respondents most frequently chose *Direct Classroom Instruction*, *Resource Room Instruction*, and *Consultation with other faculty/staff*. As shown in Table 5, when asked to report how many hours they felt were needed to adequately fulfill this most important responsibility, respondents most frequently responded that more than 20 hours per week were needed. The remaining responses indicated that 15-20 hours per week, and 5-9 hours per week were needed. Respondents were then asked how many hours they were actually able to commit to the responsibility they felt was most important. As shown in Table 6, respondents most frequently reported more than 20 hours per week, 0-4 hours, and 10-14 hour were committed.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Direct Classroom Instruction	22	54%
2	Team Teaching/ Co-Teaching	2	5%
3	Resource Room Instruction	9	22%
4	Family/Parent Liaison	1	2%
5	Administrative Duties	0	0%
6	IEP creation/maintenance	3	7%
7	Staff Training/Professional Development	0	0%
8	Consultation with other faculty/staff	4	10%
9	Teacher Mentoring Program	0	0%
10	Other	0	0%

Figure 4: The most important responsibility.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	0-4 hours per week	1	2%
2	5-9 hours per week	5	12%
3	10-14 hours per week	2	5%
4	15-20 hours per week	9	22%
5	more than 20 hours per week	24	59%
	Total	41	100%

Figure 5: Time needed to fulfill the most important responsibility.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	0-4 hours per week	8	20%
2	5-9 hours per week	5	12%
3	10-14 hours per week	8	20%
4	15-20 hours per week	7	17%
5	more than 20 hours per week	13	32%
	Total	41	100%

Figure 6: Time actually spent on the most important responsibility.

The second section of the survey sought to compare the expectations that Pennsylvania special education teachers held prior to their entry into the field. The first questions of the section focused on the time special educators spend in various classrooms. As shown in Table 7, respondents were varied in their responses. A nearly even amount of respondents expected to spend about the same amount of time or less time in a general education classroom than they do currently. Respondents expected to spend more time in a resource room and a self-contained classroom than they do currently.

The next questions of the section focused on the overall climate of the school with regard to inclusion and referred to the other teachers, the administration, and the students. Table 7 displays the participants' responses indicating that they were prepared for the level of student need. Most respondents expected that students would need about the same amount of help that they require currently. Most respondents expected more professional collaboration from colleagues but were nearly even on their expectations of assistance from administration. Most respondents expected either more or about the same amount of assistance from their administration. Finally, most respondents expected to take less work home with them each day than they do currently. These results illustrate the changes between initial expectations special educators held and how they compare to their current responsibilities.

Table 1

*Expectations Held Prior to Entering the Field*

<b>Survey Questions that address the expectations of special educators prior to entering the field.</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents who selected “More”</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents who selected “Less”</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents who selected “About the same”</b>
Before I became a special education teacher, I expected to spend _____ time in a general education classroom.	20%	39%	41%
Before I became a special education teacher, I expected to spend _____ time in a resource room. Please only select one.	44%	17%	39%
Before I became a special education teacher, I expected to spend _____ time in a self-contained special education classroom.	39%	29%	32%
Before I became a special education teacher, I expected my students to need _____ help (than) they currently need.	24%	22%	54%
Before I became a special education teacher, I expected _____ professional collaboration from my colleagues.	51%	17%	32%
Before I became a special education teacher, I expected _____ assistance from my administration.	44%	15%	41%
Before I became a special education teacher, I expected to take _____ work home with me each day.	12%	54%	34%

For the third section of the survey, respondents were asked to define their role within their particular school. No limits were placed on possible responses. Responses varied in length and in focus. Some responses were similar to basic job descriptions and some were heartfelt expressions. Ultimately, the open-ended responses revealed two emergent themes:

*Professionally-Centered Roles* and *Student-Centered Roles*. There were 41 total responses

(Appendix C) with 1 response ("I don't know where to begin!") was did not fit into an emergent theme.

Twenty-three respondents gave a role definition that was categorized as *Professionally-Centered*. Responses coded as *Professionally-Centered* contained terms and phrases considered to be focused on professional duties as an educational professional. For example, responses coded in this manner contained phrases and terms such as: "Teacher", "Secretary", "Case Manager", "Training paraprofessionals", "Administrator", "Consultant", "Supervisor", "Data Collector", or "Liaison for Parents".

Seventeen respondents gave a role definition that was categorized as *Student-Centered*. Responses coded as Student-Centered contained terms and phrases considered to be focused on the advocacy and well-being of the students in the care of the special educator. For example, responses coded in this manner contained phrases and terms such as: "To support the students goals", "A strong advocate for the special needs student", "Caretaker", "biggest fan of my students", "confidante", "Advocate for students", and "I have to inspire and motivate students".

The second question of this section asked respondents to choose what they considered to be their greatest challenge in fulfilling the special education role they had just defined. As shown in Table 8, respondents most frequently chose *Lack of adequate planning time* and *Lack of parent/family involvement*. No respondents selected *Inadequate classes/instruction at the college level*. 24 percent of respondents selected "other". These responses addressed various issues, including lack of instructional time, paperwork, class size, working and planning for state standardized tests, parents' wants and needs, and lack of time.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Lack of classroom resources	3	7%
2	Lack of professional collaboration	2	5%
3	Lack of training/professional development	3	7%
4	Lack of adequate planning time	15	37%
5	Inadequate classes/instruction at the college level	0	0%
6	Lack of parent/family involvement	8	20%
7	Other	10	24%

Other

lack of time to teach

completing IEP/paperwork

Teaching to the "test" (PSSA or Keystone) and having them be proficient in order to graduate.

class size, funding

Being case manager for high needs mainstreamed students.

showing growth off state tests. They may never be "P" on PSSA's but being basic is a big deal for some of them

Parents who make going to due process their goal before the year even begins

instruction time with students

parents, many of my parents want their students to have an "academic life skills" therefore I do not teach "life skills" lessons regularly. We go on one CBI trip a month, and I do one food prep lesson every other week.

There is not enough time in the day to do the job well, because special ed. teachers are pulled many directions.

*Figure 7: The greatest challenge in role fulfillment.*

## **CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION**

This study explored the roles and responsibilities of currently employed K-12 special educators in Pennsylvania. The expectations that were held by special educators prior to entering the field were examined and compared to the current responsibilities. Participants in this study were given the opportunity to define their own roles within their particular schools because special educators must serve in various contexts, depending on the employment position. The study explored four specific research questions to determine findings: a) How do special educators define their role in today's schools? b) What are the responsibilities of special educators in today's schools? c) What expectations did special educators have about their role as a special educator prior to entering the field? d) How do current experiences of special educators compare to their initial expectations?

### **How Do Special Educators Define Their Role?**

When the special educators who participated in this survey were encouraged to use their own words to define their role in their school, they chose one of two ways to define themselves. The responses either addressed their students or their professional responsibilities. While neither is particularly positive or negative, it is illustrative of the divergent roles that special educators hold. Special educators are unique in that their roles differ highly depending on their current employment position, yet their views on how they function within their schools share many similarities. Many special educators see their role as primarily a professional one, engaged in the duties that their job expressly requires. They refer to themselves as teachers, consultants, administrator, parent liaison, and case managers. This is not to say that they overlook their responsibilities to the students, though. Many of the responses in this study's findings proudly

listed the many different aspects of their current role, as if the mere act of juggling all of these were a role in itself.

More frequently than those discussed above, special educators defined their roles as student-centered. Special education teachers view their role as one that is devoted to the needs of the students, which for a student requiring specialized instruction can be many. This study's findings suggest that special educators feel that they must act as an advocate for their students. A particular response, "To be a strong advocate for the special needs student while recognizing limitations of regular educators' time and resources" seems to illustrate the duplicity of the special educators' role. It suggests that, while special educators must care deeply for the needs of their students, they must also work in a professionally collaborative role within their schools.

Finally, in order to gain a rounded perspective of a special educator' role it is necessary to explore the elements that special educators find to be challenges and barriers to its fulfillment. Findings of this study suggest that special educators lack adequate planning time and this is a barrier to role fulfillment. These findings are consistent with those of Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, Hou, and Garvan (2009) who found that beginning teachers listed "time" as one of the biggest problems faced. Overall, this study's findings on the roles of special education teachers are consistent with those found in the literature, such as research by York-Barr, Sommerness, Duke, & Ghere (2005) as well as Wasburn-Moses (2005).

### **What Are the Responsibilities of Special Educators in Today's Schools?**

The online survey was constructed to explore this question. The first section of the survey, which addressed the current responsibilities of special education teachers, offers some insight into the research questions. While the creation and maintenance of student IEPs is a

required element of special education, findings in this study suggest that the other responsibilities of a special educator vary greatly. These findings illustrate that many special educators consult with other faculty and staff and also teach, either directly in a classroom or in a resource room. Special educators also find themselves responsible for transitioning students, non-certified personnel (like student teachers and paraprofessionals), advocating for students, and collecting data. The findings also suggest that some special educators also spend time as an itinerant teacher, moving from classroom to classroom or even from school to school.

The responsibilities of a special educator may be varied, but there is similarity in what responsibilities take up the most of their time. This study found that IEP creation and maintenance takes up the most time for special educators. In addition to the main selection of IEP creation and maintenance on the survey, respondents also added other responses that were similar in that they included paperwork of some kind. In addition, the findings of this study suggest that many special educators are spending more than 20 hours per week on this responsibility. This is a finding that is consistent with previous research such as the SPeNSE (2003) study.

Special educators indicated that, overall, direct classroom instruction was the responsibility that they felt was most important. Out of all of the responsibilities and duties that are required of a special educator, the thing that they want to do most is teach directly to students in a classroom. These findings suggest that special educators feel not only comfortable teaching in a classroom environment, but that they feel that instruction is fundamentally important to student success. Findings in this study suggest that special educators need more than 20 hours per week in order to adequately fulfill their most important responsibilities, yet only 31.71% of special educators are actually able to commit this much time to the responsibility.

The implications of these findings should be of interest to current special educators as well as school administrators. With the current emphasis on standardized test performance, it is necessary that teachers spend time engaged in direct classroom instruction with their students. These findings suggest that special educators have a strong desire to be involved in this instructional process, yet are engaged in other responsibilities instead.

### **What Expectations Did Special Educators Have About Their Role as a Special Educator Prior to Entering the Field and How Do Those Expectations Compare to Current Experiences?**

For the purposes of this research, a response of *About the same amount of* indicated that the respondent felt that the expectations they held previously are consistent with the current experiences. Findings from this research suggest that special educators' expectations do not always match their current experiences. Special educators expected to spend more time in resource rooms and self-contained classrooms than they currently do. The findings of this study also suggest that special education teachers had clear and accurate expectations about the amount of help that their students will need. Special educators expected to receive more professional collaboration from their colleagues, as well as more assistance from their administration. It is also apparent that special educators expected that they would take less work home with them each day.

These findings are consistent with Boyer's (2004) previous research into the concerns held by pre-service special educators. This research suggests that pre-service teachers who are about to enter the field of special education are not only concerned about being adequately prepared for their positions, they are holding inaccurate expectations about what will be expected of them when they enter the field. These findings could play a part in determining reasons for

the current teacher shortage, as unprepared or uncertified teachers enter the field of special education may not have accurate expectations of what the position entails. These findings also support the previous finding that special educators who have more student teaching experience tend to stay in the field longer (Connelly & Graham, 2009). These results suggest that programs for teacher preparation include more opportunities for pre-service or current teachers to be informed about the duties and classes they will be expected to undertake. Addressing this knowledge gap may help to keep beginning teachers in their jobs longer and with higher levels of satisfaction.

The implications of these findings are pertinent as well. It is vital that an educator find balance between these roles, as many who participated in this study seemed to do. If a special educator spends too much time on one particular role or aspect of a role, they may be failing to give adequate attention to either the needs of the student or the requirements of the job.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

There are two major limitations to this study. First, the weak return rate of online surveys led to a sample size less than expected. There was considerable time and effort put forth in the gathering of special education teachers' email addresses, as this contact information is not available on any consistent basis. This small sample size affects the data in several ways. While a group of 41 special education teachers offers some enlightening insight into the experiences of a Pennsylvania special educator, it is impossible to generalize the findings to include all special education teachers in Pennsylvania, much less the entire country. It is also likely that those special educators who chose to reply comprise a subgroup of all special educators who share particularly realistic expectations.

It should be noted, however, that a low return rate of online surveys may suggest that special educators simply cannot find the time to devote to a short Internet survey. With the many responsibilities and roles in which these educators serve, it can be expected that many of them simply are not willing to give the time for something extra. If over half of those surveyed reported that they take more work home with them than they expected, it can be assumed that even more of the special educators who would have like to have participated in a research survey were most likely busy working on job responsibilities.

Second, the attempt to make the survey quick and easy to complete resulted in the limitation of data. It would be helpful to include more demographic data, for instance, so differences between experienced and beginning teachers could be further examined. Also, the varied roles and positions that special educators hold results in varied responses to the survey's questions. For instance, not all special education teachers are required to do transition planning for their students, some may spend different amounts of time in different types of classrooms depending on their specific job duties, thus making it impossible for them to participate in some of the responsibilities listed on the survey.

The findings of this research hold several important future implications. First, the high demand for the field of special education is due mostly to the lack of appropriately certified individuals available to fill the positions. This suggests two things. One, the rate of inexperienced teachers that will find positions in special education will most likely increase. And two, the rate of unqualified or uncertified teachers findings positions in special education will also increase. The findings of this study indicate that special education teachers hold a myriad of responsibilities and roles within their schools, so many that they are unable to commit adequate time to the things that they feel are important to themselves and to the students. The

findings also indicate that prior to entering the field, special education teachers hold expectations of their duties and roles that do not reflect their eventual experiences. Therefore, when these new special education teachers enter the classroom for the first time they may be met with responsibilities and roles that they never expected they would have to undertake. This has the potential danger of resulting in unhappy, disillusioned teachers, and the continuation of a perpetual teacher shortage.

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## Appendix A-Copy of Survey

1. Please review the following list of responsibilities for a Special Educator. Please check all that apply to your current employment position.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Direct classroom instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> I.E.P. creation/maintenance             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Team teaching/Co-Teaching    | <input type="checkbox"/> Staff Training/Professional Development |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Resource Room instruction    | <input type="checkbox"/> Consultation with other faculty/staff   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family/Parent Liaison        | <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher Mentoring Program               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Administrative Duties        | <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="text"/>              |

2. Which of the following responsibilities take up the MOST hours in your week? Please choose no more than three.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Direct classroom instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> I.E.P. creation/maintenance             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Team teaching/Co-Teaching    | <input type="checkbox"/> Staff Training/Professional Development |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Resource Room instruction    | <input type="checkbox"/> Consultation with other faculty/staff   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family/Parent Liaison        | <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher Mentoring Program               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Administrative Duties        | <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="text"/>              |

3. Please estimate how many hours per week you spend on the one responsibility from above that takes up the most of your time.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 0-4 hours per week   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 15-20 hours per week        |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 5-9 hours per week   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> more than 20 hours per week |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 10-14 hours per week |   |

4. Which of the following responsibilities do you believe is most important? Please choose one.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Direct classroom instruction | <input type="checkbox"/> I.E.P. creation/maintenance             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Team teaching/Co-Teaching    | <input type="checkbox"/> Staff Training/Professional Development |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Resource Room instruction    | <input type="checkbox"/> Consultation with other faculty/staff   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family/Parent Liaison        | <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher Mentoring Program               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Administrative Duties        | <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="text"/>              |

5. Please estimate the number of hours you feel are needed to adequately fulfill the responsibility you find most important.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 0-4 hours per week   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 15-20 hours per week        |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 5-9 hours per week   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> more than 20 hours per week |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 10-14 hours per week |   |

6. Please estimate how many hours per week you actually able to commit to the responsibility you find most important.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 0-4 hours per week   | <input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 hours per week        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5-9 hours per week   | <input type="checkbox"/> more than 20 hours per week |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10-14 hours per week |  |

7. Before I became a Special Education teacher, I expected to spend \_\_\_\_\_ time in a general education classroom. Please only select one.

- More
- Less
- About the same amount of

8. Before I became a Special Education teacher, I expected to spend \_\_\_\_\_ time in a resource room. Please only select one.

- More
- Less
- About the same amount of

9. Before I became a Special Education teacher, I expected to spend \_\_\_\_\_ time in a self-contained Special Education classroom. Please only select one.

- More
- Less
- About the same amount of

10. Before I became a Special Education teacher, I expected my students to need \_\_\_\_\_ help (than) they currently need. Please only select one.

- More
- Less
- About the same amount of

11. Before I became a Special Education teacher, I expected \_\_\_\_\_ professional collaboration from my colleagues. Please only select one.

- More
- Less
- About the same amount of

12. Before I became a Special Education teacher, I expected \_\_\_\_\_ assistance from my administration. Please only select one.

- More
- Less
- About the same amount of

13. Before I became a Special Education teacher, I expected to take \_\_\_\_\_ work home with me each day. Please only select one.

- More
- Less
- About the same amount of

14. Special educators play a vital role in today's schools. A "role" goes beyond mere responsibilities. Please define your role as a Special Educator in your particular school.

15. What do you consider to be your greatest challenge in fulfilling your role as a Special Education teacher in Pennsylvania? Please only choose one.

- Lack of classroom resources
- Lack of professional collaboration
- Lack of training/professional development
- Lack of adequate planning time
- Inadequate classes/instruction at the college level
- Lack of parent/family involvement
- Other

## Appendix B-Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent

Hello Pennsylvania Special Education Teachers! As a former teacher and current graduate student, I invite you to please complete a short (15 minutes/15 question) online survey. This survey is for my graduate research thesis at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The survey is meant to explore the expectations and experiences of Special Education teachers in Pennsylvania.

Your email address was found by me on your school district's website. If you feel you have received this survey in error (you are not a currently employed and certified Special Education teacher in Pennsylvania) please accept my apologies and disregard this email.

Your survey will be handled anonymously. The email addresses will be deleted as soon as the data is collected. This research study and the survey have been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Before you take the survey, please read the Informed Consent Letter that is below. Completion of the survey assumes your informed consent. The link for the survey can be found below the letter.

### **Letter of Informed Consent**

Dear Special Educator,

This letter is to provide you with information concerning a study of how special educators in Pennsylvania define their role in today's schools. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are permitted to stop your participation at any time. Your withdrawal from the study will in no way harm your relationship with the university, your school district, or your fellow participants.

The purpose of this study is to explore how special educators define their roles within today's educational system. The study will examine special educators' expectations upon entering the field of special education as compared to their current responsibilities. The study will also explore the differences between these expectations and current experiences.

Data will be collected through an Internet survey emailed to special educators throughout the state of Pennsylvania. When the surveys are returned, the results will be put into a computer-based statistics program and analyzed for common themes. No identifying information will be attached to any responses, making this study completely anonymous.

Throughout your participation in this study please do not hesitate to ask questions by contacting me through email or by phone. If you are curious as to the results of this study, I would be happy to share them with you. During and after the research, all personal information will be deleted and not available for any other use.

There are no known risks associated with this study. The benefits of this study will be that the information will help teachers and administrators better serve students with disabilities in the classroom as well as improve the practice of special educators in Pennsylvania.

Completing the following online survey expresses that you have been informed of all of the procedures and of the purpose of this study and that you are a voluntary participant. Thank you in advance for your willingness to share your experiences as a Special Education teacher in

Pennsylvania.

Stephen J. Ference, Graduate Student, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

[s.j.ference@iup.edu](mailto:s.j.ference@iup.edu) 724-357-5686 (office)

Thank You in advance! Your participation in this brief survey will be of great help to this important research project!

-Steve Ference

**Follow this link to the Survey:**

[https://iup.qualtrics.com/SE?SID=SV\\_d4G7pRxj2Qti3wU](https://iup.qualtrics.com/SE?SID=SV_d4G7pRxj2Qti3wU)

## Appendix C-Open-Ended Responses to Survey Question 14

**1.Student Centered Role-**

Reference 1 - 0.74% Coverage

1-advocate, parent, educator, counselor, nurse, facilitator

Reference 2 - 3.72% Coverage

4-To support the students goals, have relationships with the parents, provide social opportunities, soliciting jobs around the school, creating curriculum to suit the students needs, policing our own paperwork with the fear of it being wrong, caring enough to stay late to get the job done

Reference 3 - 1.62% Coverage

7-To be a strong advocate for the special needs student while recognizing limitations of regular educators' time and resources.

Reference 4 - 1.23% Coverage

10-In my classroom, I am the teacher, caretaker, ambassador, liaison and biggest fan of my students

Reference 5 - 3.74% Coverage

13-My role I feel is never ending. I am consistently trying to work with students, but don't have time to always check in on my students who remain in the regular classroom since my schedule is packed so tight with other responsibilities. I feel as if I am here for anything that is needed.

Reference 6 - 2.66% Coverage

14-To ensure that each kid learns something new every day and is prepared for life after high school, no matter what their cognitive ability is or how their family life influences them positively or negatively.

Reference 7 - 5.58% Coverage

15-To assist students with disabilities to transition from school to "real" life in a productive manner and help them understand that each student has choice and responsibility to overcome/learn strategies to deal with their specific learning disability as the "real" world does not care what the specific disability is but what the person can accomplish within the workforce/higher education. Also to encourage self-advocacy skills.

Reference 8 - 2.89% Coverage

16-I am a teacher of academic subjects, a confidante, a support system(academic and emotional), a pseudo-parent, a tester, a booster or fragile and damaged esteems, a regular ed. aide, a one-on-one for 12 students at one time.

Reference 9 - 1.66% Coverage

17-My main role as a Special Educator is to teach the students what they need to know to become independent and successful in life.

Reference 10 - 1.26% Coverage

19-To remediate students and return them to the general education curriculum. Advocate for students.

Reference 11 - 0.21% Coverage

21-Student advocate

Reference 12 - 4.04% Coverage

23-I do it all. I work with kids before they are even tested to try to bring them up to speed. I am involved with RTI and progress monitoring of regular education kids, plus my students. Teachers come to me all the time about why a student didn't qualify for services. They think we can magically cure these kiddo's!

Reference 13 - 1.39% Coverage

26-I work as an advocate for the students on my caseload because many will not/cannot advocate for themselves.

Reference 14 - 1.87% Coverage

32-Problem solve to meet the specific needs of students with the materials on hand and ensuring that there needs are being met as listed in the IEP

Reference 15 - 2.29% Coverage

35-I teach life skills so my role is to have my students participate with and accepted by the regular education students and teachers, and in turn by the people in the real world.

Reference 16 - 0.89% Coverage

36-to provide instruction so that each student reaches his/her potential

Reference 17 - 3.80% Coverage

39-I have to inspire and motivate students, parents, and teachers. I need to believe in my students abilities and their possibilities. I need to include regular education students in my classroom activities to make my students more accepted by their population. Respect by me, gets respect back..

## **2. Professional Centered Role**

Reference 1 - 0.48% Coverage

2-Team teach, consults, and I.E.P. writing

Reference 2 - 0.93% Coverage

3-Do everything, parent, teacher, guidance counselor, mediator, secretary,

Reference 3 - 2.94% Coverage

5-My role as a special educator in my school goes beyond mere responsibilities and includes: collaboration, cooperation, intervention, individualization, planning, evaluation, vision, networking, parent communication, counseling.

Reference 4 - 6.90% Coverage

6-My role as the special educator in my particular school is to teach direct instruction in language arts and math to the 7th grade students. I am also to support the students in their regular education classes, but assisting with the adapting and modifications, as well as re-teaching and review the concepts with the students. I am also to consult with the regular education teachers about tests, quizzes, missing assignments, and the students IEPs. I am also support the students in resource with the skills that they are weakest in.

Reference 5 - 0.84% Coverage

8-Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Teacher of the Gifted

Reference 6 - 6.02% Coverage

9-I am an elementary resource learning support teacher, and I travel between 2 different school buildings. I teach 2nd grade pull-out math and reading, 5th grade pull-out math, and 4th/5th grade pull-out reading. I also go into 1st and 2nd grade regular education classrooms to provide intervention to struggling students. Additionally, I have several students that are fully included in the regular education classroom, so frequently check in with their teachers.

Reference 7 - 0.49% Coverage

11-Elementary Life Skills Support Teacher

Reference 8 - 12.47% Coverage

12-Case Manager of 17 students which involves weekly assessments of their IEP goals to monitor their progress. Also, direct instruction using scientifically based programs for all of language arts areas and math. Adapting and modifying regular content area instructional materials and tests for my students. Making instructional games for them to use in studying for their tests. Working within the regular classroom to help students maintain attention and complete writing activities. Consulting with teachers. Meeting with parents to discuss their child's educational needs. Developing re-evaluation reports and creating defensible IEP's for each student several times a year. Training paraprofessionals to help in the learning support classroom, to assist students in the regular class setting, to deal effectively with children who have emotional needs and who are autistic. Curriculum development for regular class teachers, as well as special educators.

Reference 9 - 1.08% Coverage

20-While unfortunate, my roles seem to be in order of administrator, advocate, teacher

Reference 10 - 2.66% Coverage

22-Consultant, instructor, supervisor, expert, novice, advocate, counselor, liaison, the facets of the role are endless in my opinion if you are willing to commit to do the best possible job for your students.

Reference 11 - 3.06% Coverage

24-teacher, calling/emailing parents, keeping track of homework, developing IEP's/Reevaluations, role model for my students, advocate for my students, modifying assignments/tests, Resource room study halls- helping students with assignments

Reference 12 - 2.07% Coverage

25-I am expected to provide direct instruction to my students, write/maintain all of their IEP's and be the liaison/enforcer of the IEP with the regular ed. teachers

Reference 13 - 0.93% Coverage

27-Life skills instruction full time/Learning Support instruction part time

Reference 14 - 2.41% Coverage

28-Work at several buildings as an Emotional support itinerant teacher...consulting with staff, making direct observations of students, working individually and in groups with students

Reference 15 - 1.40% Coverage

29-a special ed. teacher is a person who must raise the scores on tests when the child does not meet proficiency

Reference 16 - 0.66% Coverage

30-I have become a data collector instead of a teacher

Reference 17 - 1.93% Coverage

31-I feel like an aide in the classroom, and I feel like I'm supposed to be a magician to get my students to understand material they have no idea about.

Reference 18 - 2.59% Coverage

33-Manager of paraprofessionals, TSS and the many other individuals that enter my classroom each day. A parent mentor to give them guidance and feedback so that their child can perform better in school.

Reference 19 - 0.69% Coverage

34-Intensive (self contained) Learning Support class K-2

Reference 20 - 3.21% Coverage

37-We are suppose to be the resource person, the liaison for parents, run IEP meetings, doing all the paper work for IEP's and progress monitoring, and being the 'jack of all trades' to make sure the children complete all their work in a timely manner!

Reference 21 - 0.44% Coverage

38-to provide support to all involved

Reference 22 - 0.19% Coverage

40-Case Management

Reference 23 - 3.19% Coverage

41-I am responsible for several student's Language Arts and Math instruction in a self contained classroom. I am also responsible for collaborative teaching of science and social studies in the regular education classroom and all my student's IEPs.