

Free and Appropriate Public Education and the Personnel Crisis for Students with Visual Impairments and Blindness

Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COPSSE research is focused on the preparation of special education professionals and its impact on beginning teacher quality and student outcomes. Our research is intended to inform scholars and policymakers about advantages and disadvantages of preparation alternatives and the effective use of public funds in addressing personnel shortages.

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INTRODUCTION

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to all students with disabilities. However, the 21st century began with an unprecedented shortage of certified special education teachers for all areas of exceptionality. This paper defines the personnel issues specifically related to children who are visually impaired. It focuses on teachers of students with visual impairments (TVI), teachers of students who are deafblind (TDB), and those who teach orientation and mobility (O&M) skills. After establishing definitions and providing an overview of personnel preparation programs, the paper addresses the following issues: (1) national efforts impacting the number of personnel prepared; (2) supply and demand of professionals; and (3) certification.

PROBLEMS WITH ESTIMATES OF NUMBER OF CHILDREN TO BE SERVED

Available estimates came mainly from two independent annual special education administrative data sets with vastly different criteria and conditions for preparing reports: the Office of Special Educational Programs (OSEP) child count and the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) register. APH's register refers only to students who are legally blind (which is a narrow definition of severe visual impairment), and in the year 2000, its count of such children was 54,556 (APH, 2000). That number is more than twice the OSEP child count for that period, yet the OSEP count is defined by the broader IDEA definition.

VISUAL IMPAIRMENT: DEFINITIONS

The IDEA defines visual impairment and deafblindness more broadly than legal blindness, referring to educationally significant functional vision and hearing problems. The latest available national report estimates that 26,950 visually impaired and 1,845 deafblind children are served by local and state education department estimates. OSEP, which has long recognized that this state-reported deafblind count is too low, has sponsored an alternative count through the Deafblind Census, which lists the count at 10,800.

APH uses the definition of legal blindness to determine the eligibility of children and adults in an educational setting up to the completion of high school. Its count as of January 2000 is 54,556 children and youths who are legally blind. The National Plan for Training Personnel to Serve Children with Blindness and Low Vision (NPTP) research estimated that 93,600 students with educationally significant visual impairment were in special education programs. That figure includes 32,700 children with visual impairments; 10,800 students with deafblindness; and 50,100 with at least one other disability not deafblindness in addition to visual impairment. This paper used the NPTP's estimate of 93,600 students, which includes both legally blind and deafblind children.

PERSONNEL PREPARATION

Educational Models

During the first 85 years that residential schools for children with visual impairments existed, teachers acquired their specialized skills through apprenticeship. In the 1920s day school classes for the "partially sighted" became more fully developed. By the 1940s, the first resource programs for children with visual impairments were established. During the 1950s and 1960s, the itinerant program model (teachers traveling from school to school) grew in popularity, although special schools were still the predominant education placement. In those days, an itinerant teacher's case load was approximately 15 students, and the geographic area served was smaller than is typical today. The new model of public school education that included students with visual impairments in their local neighborhood schools was already in place in 1975 when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed and the era of mainstreaming began in earnest. Today, the itinerant service delivery model is used for approximately 90% of the population of students with visual impairments who receive special education services. Too often, however, teachers carry very large case loads and cover far more territory than in the past.

A Brief History

In 1918, the University of California offered the first teacher preparation program, followed by a program at the Perkins Institution for the Blind. In 1921, Teachers College at Columbia University started summer programs for teachers of the “partially sighted,” and in 1925 the first summer preparation course was offered at the George Peabody College for Teachers (Scholl, 1986). By the late 1940s, special education was considered so important that several universities established teacher preparation programs in various areas of exceptionality. During the next two decades, university-based programs for teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) were influenced by these factors: a growing number of children with retrolental fibroplasias; philosophical change toward educating children in their home communities; shift from the idea of conserving sight to using functional vision; a belief that techniques for teaching daily living skills and independent mobility, which were systematized and demonstrated by the Veterans Administration program for blinded veterans of World War II, were adaptable for use with children.

In 1957, with help from the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), four universities were identified to develop year-round programs to prepare TVIs. Personnel preparation programs for students who are deafblind began in 1955. After the rubella epidemic of 1964-1965, new programs were put in place to meet the critical need for teachers of children with deafblindness caused by this virus. In the 1960s, Boston College offered the first personnel preparation in orientation and movement (O&M), and an infusion of federal funds helped to spur growth in the number of programs where educators could receive training. The funding provided tuition and stipends for students as well as support for faculty salaries and related program costs.

In the early 1970s, there was widespread development of competence-based education for all teacher preparation programs in the U.S. Personnel preparation programs for children with visual impairments were encouraged to identify the unique teacher competencies necessary to teach children with visual impairments. As efforts were underway to define teacher competencies and to develop educational standards, there was growing concern about the number of university programs that would be needed to ensure a sufficient work force.

During the 1980s, federal funds became scarce, and there was a dramatic reduction of applicants for teacher preparation programs in special education—especially in the area of visual impairments. A federal mandate to limit money previously available for faculty positions placed entire programs in jeopardy. Programs reduced faculty positions, and a number of highly respected university teacher preparation and leadership programs began to close, because university budgets could not absorb the costs. As a result of these cuts, the U.S. now has a chronic and growing shortage of qualified TVIs and O&M specialists.

Current Status

Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments (TVI). The paper details the current status of professional preparation programs. In 1987, 42 programs prepared TVIs. By 1999, only 36 programs existed. When percentages of faculty commitment for preparing the nation’s TVIs are combined in one study, the 57 full-time faculty members’ assignments were equivalent to 31.8 full-time-equivalent employees (FTEs).

Orientation and Mobility Instructors (O&M). Seventeen university programs are currently approved by AER to prepare O&M specialists. Thirty-one faculty members indicated full- or part-time assignment preparing O&M instructors. At the time of most recent survey, the nation had 23.5 FTE preparing O&M instructors.

Teachers of Students with Deafblindness (TDB). In 1994, 10 university programs were preparing teachers of deafblind students. Five years later, there were only 6 programs with 10 faculty members. By adding the percentages of their allocated time to preparing TDBs, 4 FTE were working toward this effort.

INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Current Capacity

The total number of new professionals entering the field of teacher training for students with visual impairments has fluctuated: 365 in 1995-1996, 416 in 1996-1997, 383 in 1997-1998, and 375 in 1998-1999. Thirty-three programs each graduated an average of 11.24 students in 1998-1999. In 1998-1999, an average of 4.9 teachers, 1.6 O&M specialists, and 0.9 dually certified personnel were prepared for each state.

Recruitment

Typical traditional recruitment efforts by universities do not seem to work for programs preparing personnel for students with visual impairments. Successful recruits have reported they became aware of the field through contact with a professional, friend, family member, or acquaintance who is visually impaired; reading books (about Helen Keller, for example) or journals; and volunteering with persons who are visually impaired. They also found that people were motivated to enter the field largely because of a desire to help others; a desire to establish contact with professionals in the field; and interest in the methods used by people who have visual impairments.

Among the reasons for recruiting difficulties reported in research and discussed in the paper are: (1) marketing toward shortages in general education; (2) the added expense for training when general educators receive the same salaries; (3) the itinerant nature of most TVI and O&M jobs; (4) the need to find work where there are enough students with visual impairments; (5) the lack of available training programs; (6) financial/family hardship for a prospective student to leave a community to enroll in a program; (7) the need for programs to be offered on a consistent yearly basis; (8) the need for consistent and continual funding of personnel preparation programs.

Certification

The field has two major avenues for certification of personnel serving students with visual impairments: certification by professional organizations and state certification. The Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Educational Professionals (ACVREP) offers national certification to O&Ms who have taken courses at approved university preparation programs and submitted their transcripts. AER approves programs in orientation and mobility as well as programs in TVI. The National Blindness Professional Certification Board (NBPCB) now offers a new certification for all professionals in the blindness field, with the exception of TVIs. State Certification.

Data on state certifications for TVI are not current. In 1987, certifications were available in 45 states, and the remaining states did not require special course work to serve students with visual disabilities. Certification requirements also differ from state to state. Most states do not have a TDB certification; these teachers generally receive a TVI certification and are then recognized as TVIs. In 1996, only 17 states had any official qualifications for O&M specialists practicing in those states.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF PERSONNEL

In recent years, the profession has attempted to address the following questions:

- What are the best methods of educating students who are visually impaired?
- What part should residential and general education programs play?
- What skills and supports do teachers need if they are to provide FAPE for students with visual impairments?
- What options and resources are available to overcome the severe shortages of trained personnel who can teach specific skills to these students?

Since 1996, the field of visual impairments has come to an informal consensus that each child should be assessed in each area of the Expanded Core Curriculum for Students with Visual Impairments (see Goal 8, National Agenda,). This curriculum includes the unique learning needs of students who have visual impairments. The TVI, TDB, and O&M specialists are expected to provide instruction in each of these listed areas: compensatory skills, independent living skills, technology skills, social skills, recreation/leisure skills, visual efficiency skills, career education, and orientation and mobility skills.

Direct Service Personnel

A reciprocal relationship exists between the expressed needs of local educational agencies (LEAs) for personnel and the ability of universities to sustain programs to supply personnel.

The National Plan for Training Personnel to Serve Children with Blindness and Low Vision found 6,700 FTE teachers of the visually impaired and deafblind and 1,200 FTE O&M specialists in 2000. Given the estimate of 93,600 children requiring specialized services due to visual disabilities and 6,700 FTE specialized teachers, the resulting estimate for the current average case load is 14 children per teacher. The same mathematical calculation applied to O&M specialists suggests an average case load of 72 children per FTE specialist. While many specialists have case loads much higher, the most obvious conclusion to be drawn from that ratio is that most children are receiving no O&M services.

The difficulty in estimating current case loads and an agreed-on student-teacher ratio relates to the case load component, which involves a question of consensus on the standard of adequacy, a judgment that goes beyond questions of fact. With regard to teacher recommendations, the NPTP stakeholders concurred that an 8-to-1 ratio of students-to-teacher is a reasonable (although not necessarily ideal) average recommendation. The participants indicated that at this individual teacher case-load level, the ratio must vary with the students' needs and settings (e.g., itinerant services, inclusive setting, specialized school).

Clearly, the need for additional direct service personnel grows considerably when taking into account the need to reduce case loads for both TVIs and O&M specialists, the anticipated near-term spike in the number of direct service personnel who will be retiring, and the estimated impact of vacancies. Based on the recommended ratio of 8 students to 1 educator, a total of 11,700 FTE teachers (both TVIs and TDBs) and as many O&M specialists are recommended. This will require hiring an additional 5,000 FTE teachers of the visually impaired and more than 10,000 O&M specialists. One study has identified a 4% attrition rate for the profession, and another found that approximately 35% of those taking course work are already employed as TVIs. The number of students with visual impairments is expected to rise to 145,300 by 2005. With these results in mind, it seems likely that universities will need significant support to supply enough TVIs to serve students who are visually impaired or deafblind now or in the future. According to one report, since 1996, only 15.4 new teachers of students who are deafblind have completed programs each year. Therefore, the number of TDBs prepared during this time has fallen far short of meeting the anticipated need. Only 1,300 O&M specialists are practicing in the U.S., and university programs have produced on average 93 newly certified O&M specialists annually. This average includes 45 individuals who earned dual certification as TVI/O&M but may have been counted only once.

Leadership Personnel

The number of faculty who were anticipating retirement or leaving the field has increased from 7.2 percent in 1996 to 16 percent in 1999. Anecdotal reports from the field reveal that often universities wait several years before being able to fill vacancies. Other programs are known to have closed because of a lack of candidates for faculty positions. During the 2002-2003 academic year, vacancies were announced in 7 universities and 8 are expected to announce a position later in the year.

NATIONAL EFFORTS

Over the past decade, several grassroots and organizational efforts have been initiated to increase the number of personnel available to provide education services to students with visual impairments.

The Goals 2000 program to reform general education, combined with OSEP's effort in 1992 to incorporate special education with that movement, presented the field with a clear challenge. The National Agenda for the Education of Children and Youths with Visual Impairments, Including Those with Multiple Disabilities included ten general goals that, if achieved, would ensure appropriate access to education.

This agenda was developed with contributions from more than 400 parents, professionals, and adults with visual impairments. Goal 3 is primarily addressed in the paper.

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Programs (OSERS) of the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) has clarified the IDEA amendments of 1997 for public agencies responsible for the education of students who are blind or visually impaired. In another effort to reach administrators, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) described the best and most promising practices in a book for state and local education agencies, service providers, and parents. The National Plan for Training Personnel to Serve Children with Blindness and Low Vision in 2000 encouraged collaboration, stabilization, and diversification of funding; coordination of research; development of leadership capacity; an information and referral service; and a national recruitment campaign.

University representatives with parents, state vision consultants, and the Council of Schools for the Blind (Philadelphia) have established task forces to deal with four critical personnel preparation issues: curriculum, recruitment, research and public relations, and fund-raising. Other recent efforts to find innovative ways to solve the personnel shortage include distance education and summer-only programs.

DISCUSSION

The authors of the paper were integrally involved in many, if not all, of the profession's efforts to improve the education of students with visual disabilities. The faculty at universities and key individuals within other stakeholder organizations (including the American Foundation for the Blind, the Council of Schools for the Blind, the American Printing House for the Blind, the Association of State Vision Consultants, the National Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairment, and others) have come together in ways that would not have seemed possible from the 1960s through the mid-1990s.

At this point, two questions emerge: (1) Is there a critical mass of individuals who can take what exists and develop and implement a plan to meet Goal 3 of the National Agenda, that is, prepare a sufficient number of personnel to provide an education to our nation's children with visual impairments and deafblindness? (2) Are supports, financial and otherwise, going to be found within and without the profession to help carry out its efforts?

QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED

This paper concludes with research questions that would enable public policy makers and researchers to plan for the educational needs of children who are visually impaired or deafblind and for the needs of professionals who ensure they receive FAPE.