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State Certification Requirements for Early Childhood Special Educators

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The Office of Special Education Programs funded Center to Inform Personnel Preparation Policy and Practice in Early Intervention and Preschool Education conducted a study to obtain current information about state certification requirements for early childhood special educators who work with preschool children with developmental delays and disabilities. Data were collected via Web searches and interviews. Part B 619 and other agency representatives provided information regarding the state's certification model, the rationale for developing that model, and certification content. Results indicated great variation in certification requirements across states and limited adherence to recommendations of professional associations. **Key words:** *certification*, *ECSE certification*, *licensure*, *personnel qualifications*, *teacher certification*

TEACHER CERTIFICATION, the process by which individuals become fully qualified to teach, is the responsibility of each state and territory resulting in different certification requirements across states and territories. Certification requirements are delineated in legislation, with oversight and implementation by a designated state agency. Although variation exists, certification requirements typically specify the age range or grade level for which the individual is being certified, the standards that the individual must demonstrate to be qualified to teach, and the assessments employed to document that the standards have been achieved.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC/CEC) have jointly advocated that states develop free-standing certificates for educators working with all children birth through age 8 years, with the age range and standards for certificates being congruent across states to promote reciprocity (Hyson, 2003; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). Other professional organizations, such as the Association for Childhood Education International (1998), Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Carter, 2002), National Association of State Boards of Education (Haynes, 2004), and the American Federation of Teachers (2002) have also developed recommendations urging creation of uniform and distinctive early childhood certification.

Federal Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) legislation has also included policies specific to teacher qualifications. Most recently, the Head Start Reauthorization Bill signed into law in 2007 requires that all Head Start teachers have an associates degree by 2011 and 50% of teachers nationally have a bachelor's degree in ECE by 2013 (NAEYC, 2007). The 2006 Part B Regulations of the Individuals

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with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require that teachers in early childhood or preschool programs that are part of a public elementary or secondary school system meet the highly qualified special education teacher requirements (Walsh, 2006). Thus, those teachers must meet the state's requirements to teach preschool children with disabilities.

Age and content congruency of certification requirements have been advocated to promote reciprocal agreements across states and territories. Consistently, recommendations have stressed that ECE and ECSE certification focus on ages birth through 8 years and, within that age range, individuals specialize in 2 of the 3 age spans—infant/toddler, preschool, or primary (Hyson, 2003; Sandall et al., 2000). This would result in a broad knowledge base regarding development and learning and the implications for assessment and curriculum across the age range from birth through 8 years. Specialization in 2 of the 3 age ranges would allow for in-depth knowledge and skills based on career choices and workplace needs.

Consistent recommendations have also been made regarding the content of ECE and ECSE certification. Through the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE) State Partnership program (NCATE, 2008), 49 states and the District of Columbia have developed partnerships with NCATE through which joint accreditation reviews of teacher education programs within institutions of higher education are conducted on the basis of state and national standards. Within those states, teacher education programs are reviewed using both state and national standards although an individual institution of higher education may not seek NCATE accreditation. Thus, an ECE program would be based on state and NAEYC standards (Hyson, 2003), whereas an ECSE program would address state and DEC/CEC and CEC common core standards (CEC, 2003, Sandall et al., 2000). Blended ECE and ECSE programs would include state standards and all 3 sets of professional association standards (Hyson, 2003).

As stated, there is great variation across those jurisdictions resulting in issues regarding reciprocity. In a review of early childhood certification in the United States, Ratcliff, Cruz, and McCarthy (1999) reported that few states adhere to recommendations for a birth through age 8 years certification. They found that states' definitions of the early childhood age span vary greatly with at least 12 different licensure configurations identified. Geiger, Crutchfield, and Mainzer (2003) noted that approximately 80% of states offer certification in ECSE; however, there was great variability in age/grade levels for these certifications. That study did not report specific models of certification (eg, stand-alone ECSE, ECSE endorsement, blended ECE, and ECSE). In a more recent report of certification requirements for preschool special education staff in 33 states, 13 different age ranges were reported with birth to 5 years, birth to 8 years, 3 to 5 years, and 3 to 21 years being the most commonly reported in that order (Lazara, Danaher, & Kraus, 2007).

Although research links the quality of programs and outcomes for children with increased qualifications for early childhood educators (eg, Buysse, Wesley, Bryant, & Gardner, 1999; Cost, Quality, & Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Early et al., 2007; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 2001; Scarr, Eisenberg, & Deater-Deckard, 1994), many early childhood programs do not require staff to have college degrees, certification, or demonstrate competence in the recommended standards. However, all 50 states and territories provide services to children aged birth through 5 years with disabilities under the requirements of the IDEA (Lazara et al., 2007), thus necessitating some quality assurance measure for qualifications. In their annual review of preschool programs for children with disabilities (Lazara et al., 2007), 13 of 33 states require a single certification model for individuals to become certified to teach preschoolers with developmental delays and disabilities. These models included the following: 5 states have an ECSE certificate, 1 has a blended ECE/ECSE certificate,

3 require that an ECSE endorsement be added onto ECE or special education certification, and 4 require special education certification (eg, birth–21 years, 3–21 years). Nineteen of the reporting states had multiple routes by which an individual could become certified. These included various combinations of the above and for some states, ECE certification with no special education requirements.

In an effort to further examine, the status of state teacher certification for preschool special education, the Center to Inform Personnel Preparation Policy and Practice in Early Intervention and Preschool Education conducted a study to obtain comprehensive information about state certification requirements for early childhood special educators who work with preschool children with developmental delays and disabilities. Specific questions included the state certification requirements for early childhood special educators in the United States and the factors that influenced the type of certification that was developed. Other related findings from this study are reported elsewhere (http://www.uconnucedd.org/projects/personnelprep/).

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions were employed:

- Certification—the set of regulated requirements that lead to initial preparation in ECSE.
- Endorsement—the set of regulated ECSE requirements that are in addition to the requirements for a specific certificate, such as ECE, K-12 special education.
- Blended ECE and ECSE certification—the set of regulated requirements that lead to initial preparation in both ECE and ECSE through a single certificate.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The preschool special education coordinators (Part B 619 of IDEA) in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and US territories were the subjects for this study. The list of coordinators and their contact information was obtained from The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center's Web site. Coordinators within the 50 states and the District of Columbia were initially contacted by phone, provided with information about the study, and asked to participate in the study. Both phone and e-mail attempts were unsuccessful in attempting to contact the Part B 619 coordinators in the territories.

Instrumentation

Data were collected via Web searches and telephone interviews. Many of the state certification requirements were collected from state's Web sites by graduate assistants prior to conducting the telephone interviews. A structured interview guide with 11 open-ended and 4 close-ended questions was used for the telephone interviews. The interview questions addressed certification requirements in addition to information obtained via Web searches, the rationale for establishing those requirements, the process for developing the certification requirements, the content base for the certification (eg, standards or competencies), barriers and facilitators to developing and implementing the certification requirements, the number of licenses awarded, and information about university/college programs that prepare graduates to obtain the certification requirements.

Procedures

Web searches

Web searches were conducted by graduate assistants with certification requirements coded in table format: title of certificate, certification content (eg, standards, competencies), model of certification (eg, ECSE, ECSE endorsement, blended ECE, and ECSE), age range, university/college degree level for obtaining admission to teacher education requirements, certification examination, induction requirements, alternative routes to certification, and any additional information (eg, process for maintaining the certificate). The table was then e-mailed to the Part B 619 coordinator in each state for verification of accuracy and completeness.

Telephone interviews

Telephone interviews were scheduled when the table was e-mailed for verification. The 3 primary researchers for this study conducted the telephone interviews with the Part B 619 coordinator and/or person(s) designated by the coordinator (eg, representatives from the state's certification agency) as being most knowledgeable in the state regarding certification requirements for early childhood special educators. The interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes and were audiotaped and transcribed. In addition, the interviewer took extensive notes on the interview protocol. Interviewees received the interview transcript and the revised certification table and were asked to verify the accuracy of information for each.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (ie, percentages) were calculated for the quantitative data. Research staff analyzed the qualitative interview responses to identify salient themes and to categorize data related to topics that emerged from the responses. Each response was then coded to consensus based on the themes.

RESULTS

Respondents

Fifty-one Part B 619 coordinators agreed to participate with a final response rate of 73% ($n = 37$) for the telephone interviews and 75% ($n = 38$) for the certification tables. In 5 states, another state agency employee in addition to the Part B 619 coordinator participated in the telephone interview. The states participating in the telephone interviews were Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Although Idaho did not participate in the telephone interview, the certification table was completed for that state.

State certification requirements

Data from the Web searches and interviews resulted in specific information about each state's certification requirements. Data were summarized to reflect the number and models of certification (eg, ECSE, ECSE endorsement, blended ECE, and ECSE) employed by each state, age range of the certification, whether the certification is based on required standards or competencies, university/college degree level for obtaining admission to teacher education requirements, certification examination, induction requirements, alternative routes to certification, and any additional information (eg, process for maintaining the certificate). For the purposes of this manuscript, certification models, age range of the certification, and the content base for certification are discussed. Other results are reported elsewhere.

Models of certification

Certification requirements vary greatly across, and, within states. Twenty-six (68%) of the states have only 1 certification route to qualify to teach preschool children with developmental delays and disabilities. However, 6 different models of certification were identified in these 26 states: ECSE ($n = 13$, 50%), ECSE endorsement ($n = 6$, 23.07%) added onto special education or regular education, blended ECE and ECSE ($n = 3$, 11.54%), special education ($n = 2$, 7.69%), both ECSE and special education endorsement ($n = 1$, 3.85%), and both ECE and special education endorsement ($n = 1$, 3.85%). Table 1 identifies the models and the percent of states with each model. Eleven different age ranges were represented by these certifications (Table 2): birth to 5 years ($n = 8$, 30%), birth to 8 years ($n = 5$, 19%), 3 to 5 years ($n = 4$, 15%), 3 years to grade 12 ($n = 2$, 8%), birth to 6 years ($n = 1$, 4%), birth to grade 2 ($n = 1$, 4%), birth to grade 4 ($n = 1$, 4%), 3 years to grade 2 ($n = 1$, 4%), 3 years to grade 3

Table 1. Certification models: States with single certification routes ($n = 26$, 68%)

Certification model	*n*	%
ECSE	13	50.00
ECSE endorsement	6	23.07
Blended ECE and ECSE	3	11.54
Special education	2	7.69
ECSE and Special education endorsement	1	3.85
ECE and Special education endorsement	1	3.85

Abbreviations: ECE, early childhood education; ECSE, early childhood special education.

($n = 1$, 4%), and 3 to 20 years ($n = 1$, 4%). One state (4%) requires both special education (K-12) and ECE (birth–5 years) endorsements to be qualified to work with preschoolers with developmental delays and disabilities. Twenty of the states' certifications (77%) were standards or competency-based with 3 states (11.5%) specifying semester or quarter hour requirements for designated content areas (ie, course-driven certification). The remaining 3 states (11.5%) had no specific content requirements, with the content of preparation determined by individual university or college programs.

Table 2. Age ranges: States with single certification routes ($n = 26$, 68%)

Age range	*n*	%
Birth–5 y	8	30
Birth–8 y	5	19
3–5 y	4	15
3 y–grade 12	2	8
Birth–6 y	1	4
Birth–grade 2	1	4
Birth–grade 4	1	4
3 y–grade 2	1	4
3 y–grade 3	1	4
3–20 y	1	4
K-grade 12 and birth–5 y[a]	1	4

[a]One state requires both special education (K-12) and early childhood education (birth–5 y) endorsements to be qualified to work with preschoolers with developmental delays and disabilities.

The remaining 12 states (32%) have 2 or more certifications and/or endorsements that can be obtained to qualify to teach preschoolers with developmental delays and disabilities. Eight states (67%) have 2 different certification routes, 3 (25%) have 3 certification routes, and 1 (8%) has 6 certification routes. Additional endorsements were also identified in these states (eg, mild/moderate endorsement). Table 3 delineates the certification models for states with multiple routes. Ten different age ranges were reported for these states as seen in Table 4.

Nine of these 12 states (75%) had standards or competency-based certifications or endorsements. The states that have 6 certification or endorsement options base 4 of the 6 options on standards. The remaining state with 3 certification options bases 1 of the 3 options on standards. Table 5 identifies the content requirements for states that have multiple certification routes.

Table 3. Certification models: States with multiple certification routes ($n = 12$, 32%)

Certification models	*n*	%
Blended ECE and ECSE—2 age ranges	2	16.67
ECSE; ECSE endorsement	2	16.67
Blended ECE and ECSE—2 age ranges; ECSE endorsement	1	8.33
Blended ECE and ECSE; ECSE	1	8.33
Blended ECE and ECSE; 2 ECSE endorsements	1	8.33
ECSE; ECE	1	8.33
ECSE; ECSE endorsement; mild/moderate endorsement	1	8.33
ECSE—3 age ranges; ECSE endorsement—2 age ranges; special education	1	8.33
ECSE; special education	1	8.33
Special education—severe/profound; special education—mild/moderate	1	8.33

Abbreviations: ECE, early childhood education; ECSE, early childhood special education.

Table 4. Age ranges: States with multiple certification routes ($n = 9$ age ranges)

Age range	*n*	%
Birth–5 y	8	80
3 y–grade 3	5	50
Birth–grade 3	5	50
3 y–grade 12	4	40
3–5 y	3	30
Birth–grade 2	2	20
Birth–4 y	1	10
K-grade 5	1	10
K-grade 12	1	10
5–21 y	1	10

Rationale for certification model

The respondents were asked to provide a rationale as to why the particular certification model(s) was implemented in their respective states and the factors that led to the selection of that model versus a different model. Themes were identified for 6 different certification models or combinations of models: (1) ECSE certification, (2) ECSE certification and 1 or more other models as options, (3) ECSE endorsement, (4) blended ECE and ECSE, (5) special education, and (6) 2 endorsements (ie, ECSE and special education, ECE and special education). Six respondents could not respond to this question as they were not in the position at the time the certification was developed and approved, or because their office was not responsible for certification.

Table 5. Content requirements: States with multiple certification routes

Content requirement	*n*	%
Standards or competencies	9	75.00
Standards or competencies for 1 model, none for 2 models	1	8.33
Standards or competencies for 4 models, none for 2 models	1	8.33
None identified	1	8.33

Three themes emerged when considering the rationale for developing and implementing an ECSE certification: (1) national and state policies, (2) changes or trends in the field, and (3) depth of content knowledge and skills. Respondents reported that the age range of the certification was based on national recommendations for the early childhood period (ie, NAEYC, DEC) or to be consistent with state certification structures that were based on the organization of community programs within the state. Changes or trends in the field seemed to influence the existing certification and also lead to discussions about potential changes. For example, 1 state originally had an ECSE endorsement and with the increased need for services and research in the field moved to full certification. Another state is considering developing a blended certificate due to universal Pre-K in that state. Some states had considered a blended certificate, but because of the breadth of content needed for preparation in both ECE and ECSE, determined that this could not be completed in 1 degree program. Thus, they maintained the ECSE certificate.

Six of the states with more than 1 route to certification include ECSE as one of the options along with other models (eg, ECSE endorsement, special education, ECE). Flexibility in staffing within community programs seemed to be the primary theme when these respondents were asked about the rationale for multiple certification models. One respondent stated that a variety of certification models allow administrators to determine the supports needed to serve children in the ECE community.

Six states with a single certification route require an endorsement in ECSE to become qualified to work with preschoolers with developmental delays and disabilities. Four states with multiple certification routes include ECSE endorsement as one of the models. The endorsement is added onto another certificate (eg, Special Education, ECE). Two themes were identified: (1) legislative mandates and (2) political climate. Both state and federal legislative mandates seemed to create the need for the endorsement and

in some cases require changes in it. Two states reported that they were birth mandate states; therefore, the endorsement was developed at that time and had not changed because of reluctance within both the state agencies and universities to make changes. It was also noted that because of the uniqueness of the ECSE field, specialized training was needed versus simply requiring special education certification. In some cases, the age range of the endorsement was modified with the implementation of inclusion of services for infants and toddlers to encompass the birth through 2 years age range. From a different perspective, the lack of other legislated pre-K programs in a state may decrease the emphasis on "strong certification requirements" for preschool programs. The political climate within these states led to the development of an endorsement instead of a certification. Some states may determine that all future teachers should be prepared in "general" teacher education first, and then, add-on the specialization area.

When asked the rationale for developing a blended ECE and ECSE certification, the responses could be grouped into 3 themes: (1) inclusion/least restrictive environment, (2) collaboration, and (3) professionalism. Serving all children in inclusive environments seems to be a primary motivator for developing a blended certification model. Enhanced collaboration between agencies and disciplines was also noted by respondents. A third theme addressed professionalism of personnel and the field.

Two states with single routes to certification require a special education (eg, K-12) certification for individuals who teach preschoolers with developmental delays and disabilities. The rationale of requiring such a certification was based on 1 theme, supply and demand. These states are rural with primarily itinerant services due to the small number of preschoolers with developmental delays or disabilities per school district (only 1 or 2 identified children in some school districts). These states tend to rely on professional development once an individual enters the workforce to ensure that preschool specific knowledge and skills are obtained.

Two states require 2 endorsements be added to another certificate (ie, special education and ECSE, special education and ECE) to qualify to teach preschoolers with developmental delays and disabilities. Two themes were identified: (1) inclusion and (2) preparation for preschool. With the trend toward inclusion, respondents emphasized that preschool teachers must be prepared to work with children both with and without disabilities. In addition, both respondents indicated that previously preschool teachers were prepared in special education only with no guarantee that they had coursework or field placements specific to preschool age children. Therefore, the ECE and ECSE endorsements were added to ensure qualified staff and "improve intervention and long-term outcomes for children."

DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous studies (Geiger et al., 2003; Lazara et al., 2007; Ratcliff et al., 1999), this study found that ECSE certification requirements vary greatly across states. Although certification specific to ECSE has increased since the 1980s with approximately 80% of states requiring some type of ECSE certification (Geiger et al., 2003), the age/grade ranges and the model of certification vary across states. Some state's age ranges do not include the early childhood years at all (eg, K-12) or cover such a wide age/grade span (eg, 3–20 years, birth–grade 12) that it is questionable as to the extent of preparation in ECSE for such a certificate. These data confirm that the recommendation of professional associations that certification be based on birth through age 8 years (Hyson, 2003) is not being followed.

Limited research has been conducted related to certification models. The *Section 619 Profile,* published annually by NECTAC, identifies states with 1 or more of the models represented by these results. Some studies (eg, Miller & Stayton, 1998; Muller, 2006) have

reported the number of states with blended ECE and ECSE certification. However, our results demonstrate a more complex picture, as 5 primary certification models were identified: (1) ECSE, (2) ECSE endorsement, (3) blended ECE and ECSE, (4) special education, and (5) 2 endorsements added onto another certificate (ie, special education and ECSE, special education and ECE). Furthermore, we found that some states have 1 way by which an individual can become certified to work with preschoolers with disabilities, whereas some states have multiple routes. As a result, in some states preschool teachers may hold an ECSE certificate and have completed specific training in ECSE, whereas other preschool teachers in that same state may hold a special education K-12 certificate and have no specific training in ECSE. Likewise, the certification model and corresponding training vary across states. As with the age range of certification, the results specific to models are not consistent with recommendations of professional associations (Hyson, 2003). Both DEC and NAEYC have advocated that states develop stand-alone certificates for ECE and ECSE. In states that choose to combine the standards for ECE and ECSE, these professional associations have again advocated that the blended ECE/ECSE be a single certificate.

Respondents to the telephone interviews reported that national standards were reviewed and applied in developing state certification standards. Thirty-five of the 38 states represented in this study included standards as the content base for their certification. This seems to be an increase over that reported by Geiger et al. (2003). In their study, 29 of 50 states and the District of Columbia reported using 1 or more sets of national standards. A content analysis comparing 17 of the states' standards for this study with national standards, however, revealed limited to no relationship to national standards (see http://www.uconnucedd.org/projects/personnelprep/).

Results of this study raise questions as to whether certification requirements address national recommendations and accreditation criteria and provide relevant guidance to higher education for the development of ECSE curricula. Interview respondents indicated that certification requirements are developed and/or revised to address changes in the field, meet community needs, and to comply with legislative mandates. However, they also reported that certification development and implementation is a slow, cumbersome process in which the key stakeholders in the state with expertise in ECSE may not be integrally involved in the process.

To address the above inconsistencies and issues in certification, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Include the age range birth through 8 years and standards developed by professional associations in certification requirements (Hyson, 2003; Sandall et al., 2000).
2. Explore national certification, such as the national Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification, and/or the use across states of nationally recognized standards as a means to support reciprocity and the standardization of certification requirements (Sindelar, Bishop, Gill, Connelly, & Rosenberg, 2007).
3. Enhance collaboration between governmental agencies (eg, certification offices and departments of education) and other key stakeholders (eg, higher education, service providers) in certification development and implementation (Piper, 2007; Yates & Hains, 1997).

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