



A Snapshot of Self-Reported AAC Knowledge and Skills of Tennessee Special Educators

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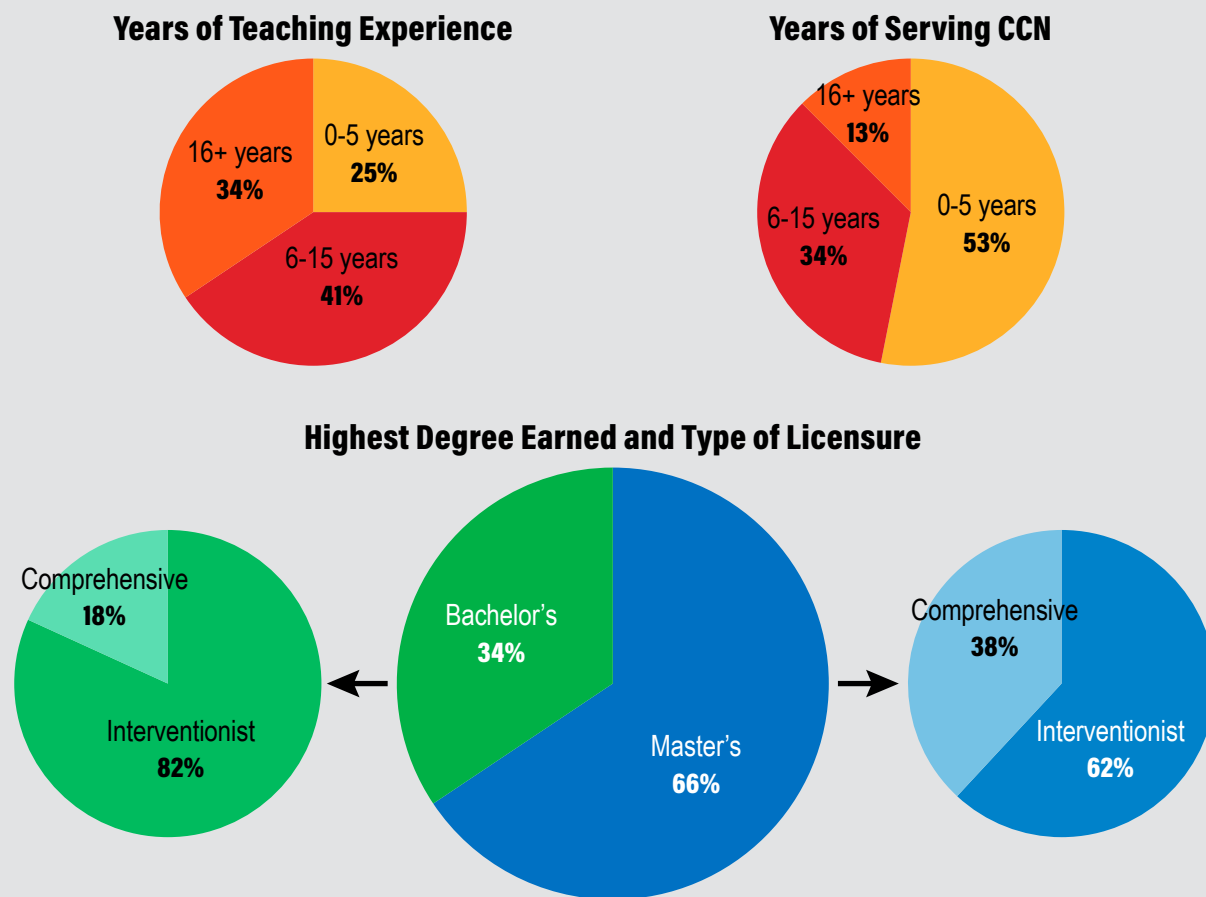
In Tennessee, 26 universities offer teacher preparation programs with degrees in special education. Of these universities, 20 offer both bachelor's and master's degrees, four offer only bachelor's degrees, and two offer only master's degrees. These teacher preparation programs primarily offer categorical teacher licensure endorsements in Special Education Interventionist K-8 or 6-12 ($n = 24$) or Special Education Comprehensive K-12 ($n = 17$), with fewer universities offering Special Education Vision Pre-K-12 ($n = 2$) and Special Education Hearing Pre-K-12 ($n = 1$). Upon completion of these teacher preparation programs, many enter the work field as special education teachers.

Based on the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), there are approximately 8,320 special education teachers working across the state of Tennessee, with a subset holding a teaching endorsement in Special Education Comprehensive K-12. Teachers with such endorsement typically serve students with extensive support needs (severe disabilities) such as autism spectrum disorders, developmental delay, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and traumatic brain injury. Students who are served under these disability categories often have complex communication needs (Page & Quattlebaum, 2012), which in turn may require the use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems. The goal in implementing AAC practices is to increase a student's independence and opportunities to communicate with others by supplementing or replacing the student's spoken or written language abilities.



DYNAMIX

Figure 1: Participants Demographic



The purpose of this report is to provide a snapshot of Tennessee special education teachers' self-reported knowledge and skills in AAC, outline practical implications, and highlight recommendations.

Early attempts have been made to determine special education teachers' preparedness on AAC practices (DePaepe & Wood, 2001; Koul & Lloyd, 1994). Unfortunately, the literature continues to indicate that special education teachers are not adequately equipped to instruct and support students with complex communication needs (Andzik et al., 2019; Costigan & Light, 2010). The lack of special education teachers' preparedness in AAC practices can negatively impact students' communication skills and usage of communication systems and, ultimately, their

long-term communicative outcomes (Andzik et al., 2019). As more students with complex communication needs receive special education services in today's classrooms, it is important for special education teachers to be prepared to support these students.

Who Participated:

The current report is based on 32 participants from Tennessee who were part of a nationwide survey conducted by Da Fonte and colleagues. All participants were special education teachers who currently or previously served students with complex communication needs. To be included, participants were required to have completed a special education teacher licensure program at the bachelor's (34.38%) or master's degree level (65.62%). On average, participants' overall teaching experience was approximately 11 years, and participants' experience teaching students with complex communication needs was approximately seven years (see Figure 1 for specific distribution). All participants taught in public schools across

the state: 53.13% in elementary schools, 31.25% in middle schools, and 15.63% ($n = 5$) in high schools. Most of the participants (56.25%) worked in rural settings, and 43.75% worked in urban or suburban settings.

Study Design and Analysis:

A cross-sectional survey was developed by the research team to evaluate special education teachers' self-reported knowledge and skills in AAC. The survey was evaluated for reliability, validity, and usability prior to dissemination. A total of 32 questions were analyzed for this report. For the purpose of analysis and reporting, *knowledge* was defined as awareness, understanding, and command of concepts and practices related to AAC, and *skill* was defined as the ability to implement, execute, or apply AAC concepts and practices.

To recruit potential participants, an email list was gathered by the research team by searching the Tennessee Department of Education website. An email list of 139 school administrators (e.g., superintendents, principals, special education directors) from across the state was compiled. School administrators were asked to share the purpose of the study and the survey link with their special education teachers.

Findings and Recommendations:

Results provided a glimpse into Tennessee special education teachers' self-reported *lack of knowledge and skills* in AAC based on their experience with their teacher preparation programs and in-service training opportunities. Overall, 78.13% of the Tennessee special education teachers reported *remarkably low* levels of knowledge and skills in AAC. Participants reported the most knowledge and skills in introductory AAC concepts, and the least knowledge in AAC assessment. The low levels of knowledge and skills are problematic considering the crucial role that special education teachers play in supporting students with complex communication needs. Findings continue to suggest that special education teachers are not receiving the training needed, in either the pre-service or in-service level, to effectively serve students with complex communication needs.

Interestingly, level of education and type of educator licensure were two influencing factors on special education teachers' knowledge and skills. For example, participants who completed a severe disabilities master's degree

preparation program reported having the highest levels of knowledge and skills in AAC compared to other participants. It is probable that teacher preparation programs in severe disabilities embed course content that is closely aligned to the unique and individualized needs of students with complex communication needs. Findings underscore the importance of teacher preparation programs maintaining a categorical focus in both their content (coursework) and experiences (practica) to ensure future special education teachers are well-prepared to meet the specific needs of their students.

Similarly, participants who had an endorsement in Special Education Comprehensive K-12 reported higher levels of knowledge and skills in AAC than participants with other types of educator licensure. These findings are not surprising, given that the type of licensure is closely linked to the type of teacher preparation program. Interestingly, although Tennessee is a categorical educator licensure state, some participants ($n = 18$) reported having a cross-categorical special education educator licensure. While participants may have received a cross-categorical licensure from another state, findings suggest there was a significant difference between categorical and cross-categorical educator licensure. Thus, there is a call to action for school districts in Tennessee to consider the type of special education teaching endorsement a teacher holds as they make decisions during the hiring process given its potential direct impact on the services provided to students with complex communication needs.

Tennessee Call to Action:

Given the low number of participants from Tennessee who responded to the survey, caution should be taken when drawing conclusions from the findings. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy to highlight that the results from Tennessee mirror nationwide findings (see Andzik et al., 2018; Da Fonte et al.), indicating that most special education teachers *do not* have knowledge and skills in AAC.

Overall, 78.13% of the Tennessee special education teachers reported remarkably low levels of knowledge and skills in AAC.

Because the type of preparation program and educator licensure had an impact on special education teachers' self-reported knowledge and skills, a call to action goes to state, teacher preparation programs, and school districts, specifically:

- ❑ For state and preparation programs to support **categorical-focused** training to enhance the knowledge and skills of those who will serve students with complex communication needs;
- ❑ For teacher preparation programs to continue to train pre-service special education teachers on the **specific student characteristics** under each educator licensure endorsement category;
- ❑ For school districts to continue to create **professional development training** opportunities that **focus on AAC practices** to help decrease gaps in knowledge and skills among in-service special education teachers;
- ❑ For school districts to support **categorical-focused** training in their professional development opportunities to enhance the knowledge and skills of special education teachers on the specific population they will serve; and
- ❑ For school districts to consider adopting a hiring process in which they **match the educator's licensure** to the specific characteristics of the students the special education teacher will serve.

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