

# School Supervisors in South Korea's Special Education Support Centers: Legal Duties and Preparation for Their Supervisory Responsibilities

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## Abstract

*In 2001, the government of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) first established Special Education Support Centers (SESCs) to provide appropriate services to students identified as having disabilities based on Korean special education law. School supervisors in the local offices of education across the nation oversee the SESC. Despite the important role of school supervisors in special education, challenges related to the management of the SESC have been reported, including the supervisors in the local offices having to play too many roles and lacking professionalism. In this paper, we examine the legal duties of school supervisors overseeing the SESC and provide recommendations for their preparation for those duties.*

**Keywords:** *disabilities, school supervisors, special education support centers, South Korea, special education policy.*

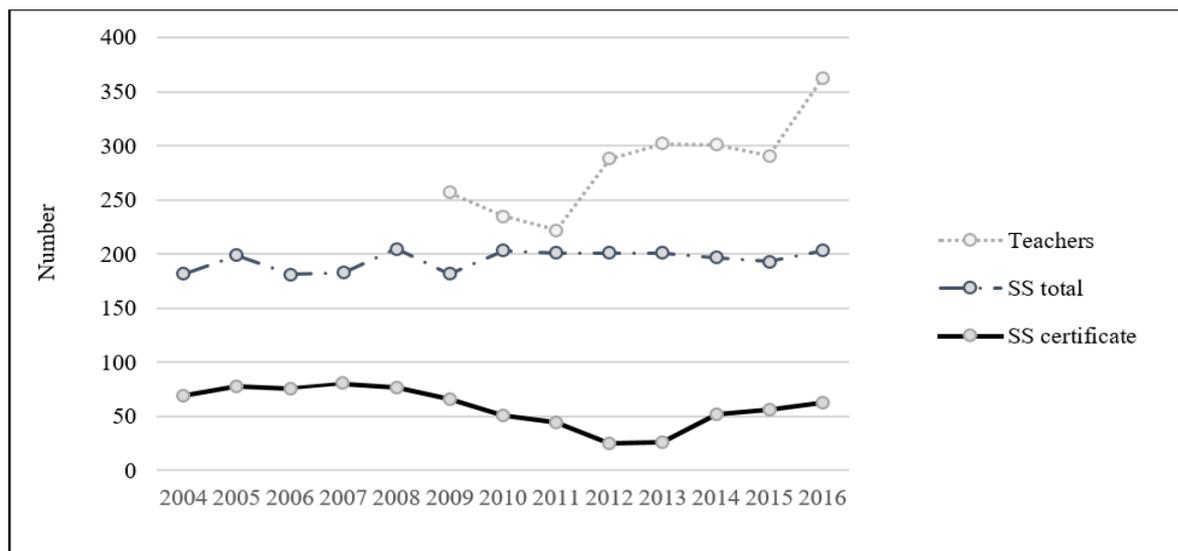
## Introduction

Special Education Support Centers (SESCs) in the Republic of Korea (South Korea) were first launched in 2001 based on the *Special Education Promotion Act* (SEPA, 1994). Specifically, SEPA (1994) mandated that central and local governments carry out tasks such as improving and supporting service delivery systems to promote special education (Article 3, Clause 1). Clause 1, in turn, influenced the establishment of SESC (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development [MEHRD], 2001). Further, in 2004, administrative guidelines were put

into place to ensure that the operation of the SESC's fell under the responsibility of special education school supervisors at local offices of education (MEHRD, 2004).

Students with disabilities received special education-related services at the SESC's; however, such services suffered from limitations stemming from a lack of legal foundations for the establishment of SESC's and placement of professionals at these centers (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MEST], 2008). With the help of *Special Education Act for Individuals With Disabilities and Others* (SEAIDO, 2008), all SESC's (182) were established as part of the 182 local offices of education in 2009 (MEST, 2009). This number increased to 199 in 2016 (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2016a).

Similarly, the number of special education teachers and school supervisors has increased throughout the decade. For example, the number of special education teachers increased from 257 in 2009 to 362 in 2016, demonstrating somewhat fluctuating trends. Namely, 362 full-time special education teachers working under the SESC's provided special education-related services to 87,950 students with disabilities across nation (MOE, 2016a). By comparison, the number of school supervisors increased slightly from 182 in 2004 to 203 in 2016. Thus, in 2016, 203 school supervisors in 17 municipal and provincial offices of education across the nation were responsible for overseeing SESC's. Among these 203 school supervisors, only 31.03% ( $N = 63$ ) held special education certification (MOE, 2016b). Further, of the 203 school supervisors, only 19.21% ( $N = 39$ ) worked exclusively within special education. The remainder (80.79%,  $N = 164$ ) were responsible for other tasks in the local offices of education in addition to special education. Figure 1 shows detailed information regarding the number of full-time special education teachers and school supervisors in SESC's across the country.



**Figure 1. Change of the number of full-time special education teachers (SPED teachers) and school supervisors (SS) in SESC's from 2004 to 2016.** Data from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (2011) and Ministry of Education (2016).

To date, limited research has been conducted into school supervisors' qualifications for their work of overseeing SESC's. Furthermore, despite the need for administrative guidelines for school supervisors in the local offices of education, few

studies have investigated school supervisors' duties in the SESC's (e.g., Choi, 2010; Lee, Lee, Cho Blair, & Kim, 2006; Woo, 2013). In particular, there is an apparent lack of research targeting special education supervision of school supervisors (MEHRD, 2004). Among the existing studies, Woo (2013) found that heavy workloads and additional roles of school supervisors could prevent students with disabilities from receiving proper special education services. Thus, it is necessary to understand school supervisors' duties in SESC's and how they are prepared for their duties in order to ensure that students with disabilities receive appropriate services for students.

To fill this void in the research literature, we reviewed laws and regulations regarding school supervisors, the roles of SESC's, and special education supervisions. First, we examined the roles of SESC's under SEAIDO (2008). Second, we reviewed the mandated qualification tests and trainings for school supervisors. Third, we examined issues related to special education supervision. Fourth, we reviewed school supervisors' duties, including overseeing SESC's. Finally, based on our findings, we suggested policy recommendations for the field of special education.

### **The Roles of Special Education Support Centers (SESC's)**

The first step toward understanding the legal duties and preparation for school supervisors' supervisory responsibilities is to understand what SESC's are and how supervisor candidates become supervisors in these centers. As a result of the enactment of SEAIDO (2008), SESC's were mandated and established under the control of subordinate offices of education (local offices of education) for the purpose of (a) administering assessments and evaluations for eligibility for special education services; (b) early identification and interventions for at-risk students; (c) special education inservice trainings; (d) information management; (e) instructional and educational supports; and (f) itinerant services and related services in special education (Article 11).

According to the mandates of SEAIDO (2008), superintendents of municipal or provincial offices of education should appoint special education professionals to take responsibilities exclusively for operating SESC's efficiently (Article 7, Clause 2). However, while the need to assign professionals at SESC's is emphasized, this goal has not been fulfilled. Thus, the school supervisors in only 8 out of the 17 municipal and provincial offices of education majored in general education as the director of SESC's. In the report of a pilot study for *The 5th Five-Year Development Plan for Persons With Disabilities in 2018-2022*, Jeong et al. (2016) suggested that senior school supervisors majoring in special education be appointed at municipal or provincial offices of education to overseeing SESC's. Furthermore, the authors recommended that professional development opportunities be expanded for professionals at SESC's. Finally, the revision of SEAIDO in 2013 also mandated that teachers receive inservice trainings to improve the quality of instruction (Article 8).

### **Legal Qualification Tests and Trainings for School Supervisor**

*The Public Education Officials Act* (2008) included two criteria that a teacher must meet in order to become a school supervisor working under a district office of education: (a) graduation from a university, college of education, national university of education, with at least five years of teaching experience or five years of a research or administrative education career, including two years of education research

experience; or (b) at least nine years' teaching experience or nine years of a research or administrative education career, including two years' teaching experience (Article 9).

Nevertheless, Jeon, Joo, and Jung (2010) insisted that there is a gap between these legal standards and current realities with regard to appointments of school supervisors, which is 10-18 years of teaching experience across local offices of education. The Chungcheongnamdo Office of Education (2013) requires that in order to be a school supervisor in charge of special education a teacher must have a minimum of 20 years' teaching experience and been recommended by the superintendent from a local office of education as well as a school principal for whom the candidate works. By comparison, the Seoul Municipal Office of Education (2012) requires a minimum of 12 years of special education teaching experience and a recommendation by a superintendent and school principal and taking a paper test in order to be a school supervisor in charge of special education.

When teachers are eligible to apply for a school supervisor position, they must submit a record of their teaching experiences, including teacher evaluation results, research performance, and awards, and then take a paper test covering education in general, their subject area, as well as education plans (Lee, 2012). According to the Chungcheongnamdo Office of Education (2013), the paper test covers supervision research, administration practices, and education plans. The Chungcheongbukdo office of education (2013) included education plan evaluation as well as essay test of current educational policy for the paper test.

Once candidates pass a personal interview as the final stage of the application process, they receive four weeks of professional development training at the National Training Institute of Education, Science and Technology (Lee, 2012). However, according to Lee, there is no specific legal basis for the duration of training and time per each session for school supervisors before they start working their work responsibility. Further, according to Lee's study, which included the training contents for future school supervisors, special education contents were excluded. As a result, school supervisors who oversee special education have limited special education backgrounds (Choi, 2010; Woo, 2013).

### **Issues Related to Special Education Supervision**

Despite the expansion of SESCOs under local offices of education, the findings of previous studies of the current state and practices of SESCOs have uncovered several issues, including a lack of professionals among SESCOs' personnel (Choi, Shin, & Cho, 2017; Lee & Kwon, 2006). Specifically, school supervisors' limited background in special education influences SESCO management (Woo, 2013). As the 2016 annual special education statistics showed, a limited number of school supervisors (31.03%) held special education certification (MOE, 2016b). This lack of special education background among school supervisors may have a negative effect the quality of the management of SESCOs. According to Choi (2010), who interviewed 10 staff members at 8 SESCOs and 10 special education teachers who had previously worked at SESCOs, school supervisors have difficulty successfully administering special education programs when they have no background in special education. Additionally, they reported difficulties in communicating with school supervisors, highlighted lack of autonomy within SESCO to make decisions regarding official documents for SESCO administration, and noted that their suggestions were not reflected in SESCO administration practices.

In addition, previous studies have found that (a) SESC cannot adequately fulfill their mission (Jang, 2008; Jung, Han, & Kim, 2004; Lee, 2002; Yoon, 2001); and (b) current teachers reported low utilization of SESC as well as low satisfaction after use of SESC services and supports (Kwon, Shin, & Shin, 2008). Further, Lee et al. (2006) summarized findings by Lee, Kim, Lee, and Cho Blair (2005) related to the management status and the needs of SESC. Of the 182 school supervisors surveyed, 144 responded. In addition, 126 teachers at SESC also responded to the survey questions. The results showed that lack of specialized staff and overworked school supervisors were the reasons for the inadequacies of SESC. As a result of these findings, the authors recommended that future school supervisors who will oversee SESC should have many years of special education teaching experience, and that current school supervisors should receive inservice training to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for effectively administrating SESC.

No specific legislative regulations regarding supervisors' responsibilities and their preparedness for working at SESC are stated in current law. That is, neither *the Public Education Officials Act* (2008) nor SEAIDO (2008) requires that school supervisors in charge of SESC receive professional development or inservice training to manage SESC. This means that any school supervisor would be able to oversee SESC because public office appointment management stipulates that every school supervisor must be transferred to other duties every year to prevent depression resulting from long-term service in the same role. Shin (2009) asserted that without assigning professional special education school supervisors to local offices of education and support, proper implementation and development of special education services is not possible. Further, he pointed to a need to enact special legislation by the Ministry of Education for appointing professional special education school supervisors rather than school supervisors in general. Finally, Jung and Lee (2004) suggested that "future policy tasks to allow school inspectors in charge of special education supervision to meet special class teachers' expectation in special education supervision" (p. 104).

### **School Supervisors' Duties, Including Overseeing SESC**

In Gyeongsangbukdo, in southeastern South Korea, school supervisors generally assume three main duties: (a) they work as education administrators by administrating school affairs, school life counseling, curriculum, lifelong education, and special education management; (b) they oversee supervision work by aligning with schools at the local level; and (c) they serve as mediators between staff in local offices of education and teachers in local schools by supporting and motivating them to collaborate (Kang, 2003).

However, school supervisors who manage SESC undertake other duties as well. Woo (2013) argued that heavy workloads and additional duties typical of school supervisors prevent students with disabilities from receiving appropriate special education services. Specifically, the Ministry of Education (2016b) reported that only 39 supervisors took exclusive responsibility for special education service delivery, while 164 supervisors managed both general and special education programs. For example, a school supervisor in charge of SESC among 14 school supervisors in the Gyeongju Office of Education (n.d.) additionally performs other tasks such as special education supervision, teacher appointments, salary upgrades, teacher management, re-appointment of teachers, inservice training for teachers, awards for teachers,

incentives for teachers, senior teacher systems, teacher association groups, evaluation systems for secondary school teachers, school evaluation, and research schools.

Another school supervisor managing SESC among five school supervisors in the Bonghwa Office of Education (n. d.) performs other duties such as advising physical education, after-school programs, private education, educational information systems, gifted education, reading and discussion education, and special education (including SESC administration).

In addition to heavy workloads, school supervisors in charge of SESCOs must be transferred to other positions every year due to *the Public Office Appointment Management Regulations* (2012). Woo (2013) insisted that newly appointed school supervisors are usually put in charge of special education, claiming that over a 10-year period, 12 school supervisors revealed the need for professional special education school supervisors who are only responsible for special education rather than taking both general and special education.

In addition to overseeing SESCO staff, school supervisors are also responsible for managing students with disabilities and special education teachers, which is one of the barriers to effective special education supervision (Jung et al., 2004). During the 2003 school year, each school supervisor ( $N = 180$ ) in charge of supervising special education was responsible for managing an average of 172 students in special schools, 6.5 students in special classes, 1.5 students in inclusion classes in South Korea (Jung et al., 2004). Based on the 2013 special education annual report (MOE, 2013a), school supervisors ( $N = 201$ ) oversee an average of 125 students in special schools, 225 students in special classes, and 80 students in inclusion classes. In addition, each supervisor oversees an average of 37 special education teachers in special schools and 48 special education teachers of special classes in general education schools (MOE, 2013a).

Even though some of the research to date has focused on school supervisors many duties in addition to overseeing SESCOs, few studies have examined the school supervisor role. Jung and Lee (2004) from the Korea Institute for Special Education compared teachers' expectation of supervisors overseeing special education supervision with supervisors' perception of their performance. They classified special education supervision of school supervisors into the following areas: management, instruction, administration, and curriculum. A total of 166 school supervisors managing special education from 180 schools and 308 teachers participated in the survey.

The results indicated that teachers' expectation was higher than school supervisors' role performance, suggesting stricter criteria for hiring school supervisors managing special education supervision, assigning special education supervision exclusively for school supervisors, and reducing the number of roles of school supervisors.

### **Policy Recommendations and Concluding Remarks**

Based on the findings of the current study, three main policy recommendations are suggested. First, school supervisors at local offices of education should hold special education teacher certification and have experience teaching students with disabilities. Although the government mandates that students majoring in general education take one course related to special education to be prepared for teaching inclusive classrooms and has strengthened the standards for teacher credential qualifications (MEHRD, 2007), these regulations are not enough. In South Korea, the

teacher training courses at university programs for general education and special education are restricted to each track. That is, general education curricula do not include courses about instructional accommodations and interventions for students with diverse disabilities (Ahn, Park, Kim, & Choi, 2014); thus, without taking special education classes and having teaching experiences in the field of special education, it is challenging to fully understand and even manage all the administrative aspects of special education.

Second, school supervisors at the local offices of education who have not majored in special education should receive intensive and ongoing inservice training. Previous research has shown that teacher training was effective at enhancing special education job-related tasks (e.g., Cho, 2007; Lee, Kang, & Jeong, 2014); however, there was a profound lack of training among administrative personnel such as school supervisors (Park, Lee, Lee, Lee, & Kang, 2015). Moreover, although the revised mandates of SEAIDO (2013) stated that both general and special education teachers must receive training in both special and general education curriculum (Article 8), there are no regulations about the training of school supervisors. There is a growing need in the field of special education for legislative efforts to advance the quality of special education by enhancing the professionalism of special education teachers since the stipulation of *The 4th Five-Year Development Plan for Persons With Disabilities in 2013-2017* (MOE, 2013b). It is important to expand the notion of professionalism to include the administrative system so as to emphasize and enhance special education supervisors' professionalism (Jeong et al., 2016).

Third, school supervisor overseeing SESCOs should mainly be responsible for special education. The heavy workloads of special education supervisors and their status under the local offices of education have been noted for several years (Park et al., 2016), yet there are no clear legislative movements or efforts to specify special education school supervisors' duties and tasks. The roles and duties of special education school supervisors should be specialized, leading to enhanced operation of SESCOs. More important, the status of special education supervisors and SESCOs at the local offices of education should be improved, and both should be entitled to an independent status (Choi, 2010).

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