

# Special Education Teacher Preparation in Belgium, Russia, and United States: A Comparative Study\*

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Sharon Judge, Ph.D.\*\* & Maria Oreshkina

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**Abstract:** *This article describes the nature and current status of special education teacher preparation in Belgium, Russian, and United States. Findings from in-depth qualitative interviews, observations and analysis of documents were used to examine the difference perspectives on the preparation of special educators within higher education settings. Cross-national differences were found among the programs due to special education reform efforts and the cultural, sociopolitical, and historical beliefs of each country. Common features and content of study programs in special education are discussed.*

The field of teacher education in special education is being confronted by several challenges—quality and quantity, the former concerning the content of the preparation provided to special education teachers, and its relevance to the realities of the modern classroom, the latter referring to the difficulty of recruitment and retention of special education teachers. These two interrelated issues seem to be universal among many countries. In addition, there has been a growing international commitment to the notion of 'inclusion' (Ainscow & Sebba, 1996; O'Hanlon, 1995; UNESCO, 1994). This term can be somewhat difficult to define, particularly in a transnational context; however, it marks a trend toward integrating special education and general education teacher preparation programs.

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\*\* Address correspondence to: Sharon Judge, Ph.D., University of Tennessee, Knoxville, A416 Claxton Complex, Knoxville, TN 37996, (865) 974-4456, E-mail: shl@utk.edu.

This article describes, analyzes, and compares the preparation of special education teachers in university teacher education programs in Belgium, Russian, and United States. The three countries present a great mixture of completely unique characteristics and yet similarities that permit grouping them together. The major objectives of this study are to (a) examine the historical and philosophical backgrounds to preparing special education teachers; (b) identify the common features and content of study programs in special education; (c) describe the professional role and activity of special educators; and (d) analyze the state of teacher preparation and the different perspectives on the education of teachers in special education. Comparative studies of special education teacher preparation are lamentably thin, and studies of teacher education in post communist Russia have been remarkably rare. The use of a comparative or international approach can provide a valuable stimulus, not only by describing the global diversity of ideas and practices in our profession, but also by revealing how social and cultural contexts

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can condition and constrain the work that we do as teacher educators.

Universities of higher education have played a critical role in preparing special education teachers. Over the last several decades, the social and political climate at national levels has influenced changes or reforms in teacher preparation. These reform efforts have directly impacted the role of the university in the preparation of special education teachers. A careful analysis of systems of higher education will shed light on the nature and direction of special education teacher preparation in three countries. While major contextual differences make comparisons and transfers of practice difficult, each country has something to offer the other.

The preparation of special educators within higher university education is carried out in many countries. The names for the study of individuals with disabilities are different among countries: Special Education (United States and England), Heilpädagogik-Sonderpädagogik (Germany, Austria, Switzerland), Orthopedagogiek (Belgium and Netherlands), Defectology (Russia), and Geneespedagogiek (South Africa). The definition and meaning of these terms vary due to the historical, cultural, and sociopolitical traditions of the society as well as the influence of contemporary attitudes, challenges, and demands. This should be clearly considered when we discuss the preparation of teachers for professional work with individuals with disabilities in Belgium, Russia, and the United States. First, however, some background information will be given on the context of the study.

### **Contextual Background**

#### ***The Belgian Context***

The educational system in Belgium has traditionally been organized within the public sector. In 1989, political responsibility for education was transferred from the national level to the language communities. This governmental decentralization transferred substantial authority for higher education from national ministries to linguistically distinct local governments throughout the country (Bridgman, 1988). French, Dutch, and German are Belgium's three official languages.

An invisible linguistic border divides the country roughly into two parts: The French-speaking South called Wallonia and the Dutch-speaking North. There is also a German-speaking area along the German border.

Developments in the integration of students with disabilities have resulted from the Special Education Act of 1970 that was modified and renamed in 1986 as The Special and Integrated Education Act. This new Act extended integrated education to all types of special needs. Thus, the Act of 1986 moves towards a less area-bound definition of special education and a more quality-conscious approach to education (Dens, 1993). This legislative movement parallels similar trends in other European Community countries. The European Community's commitment to integration is evident in their central policy thrust for the integration of students with disabilities into ordinary schools (O'Hanlon, 1993). Recent comparisons of developments in teacher preparation in the various European countries show that, in spite of all existing cultural differences, the systems are developing more or less along the same lines (Vonk, 1991). With increasing numbers of students with disabilities being integrated into regular schools, special education teacher preparation includes holistic and integrative special education coursework.

Preparation of specialists in special education is organized at the university level and requires two years of general study in psychology and education sciences and three years of specialization in special education (orthopedagogics). Study at the Department of Orthopedagogics does not focus on specific disability categories but rather a holistic approach to the education and guidance of individuals in a problematical educational situation. The study program in orthopedagogics is aimed to train specialists for professional activity in different institutions where orthopedagogical help is required. The university degree in orthopedagogics can be obtained at three higher education institutions in Belgium.

#### ***The Russian Context***

A very different portrait of special education teacher preparation exists in Russia, in

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part because of a centralized education system during the Soviet period. Needless to say, the centralized planning of curriculum and program structure during Soviet times in Russia is still prevalent amidst educational reform. The teacher education curriculum, in common with the curriculum of all educational establishments in the USSR, was centrally controlled, thus ensuring a high degree of commonality across the country, and restricting severely the amount of individual initiative that could be practiced by university faculty in adapting courses to meet the needs of their students and educational change. Enrollments in teacher education programs were supposed to be tied to national plans, and tight control was maintained over the number of universities, size of institutions, admission criteria, curricula, and staffing. Higher education systems were almost entirely operated by the state, and education was provided free of charge.

The Russian Federation is comprised of 89 federations (republics and regions). Organization of higher education is a shared responsibility of federal and republican or regional authorities. The Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation publishes national educational standards, which broadly defines curricula and requirements for preparing specialists in institutions of higher learning. However, national standards provide opportunity for curricula changes and modifications in accordance with local needs and conditions. Accreditation is also required to insure that an institute provides quality education in accordance with federal educational standards. Accreditation of universities and institutions of higher learning is administered by representatives of federal educational bodies.

Traditionally, preparation in special education is carried out at teachers' training (pedagogical) universities or institutions at the faculties (colleges) of special education and lasts for five years. There are approximately 40 pedagogical institutions of higher education in Russia that provide courses leading to the academic degree of special education. Central authorities have made an attempt to control the degree of commonality in the teacher education system with the introduction of a set of standards for special

education teacher education, which are designed to establish a framework for the development of the system, while still allowing the universities to retain and exploit the freedom it has received to introduce new approaches and courses. However, the network of pedagogical institutions is gripped by financial difficulties as the transition to the 'market economy' progresses. In 1998, it was reported that the funding for teacher preparation higher education institutions was to be cut by a further 26.2 percent, placing even greater strain on the system (Nekhames, 1998). Such developments only hinder the introduction of new courses, use of technology in education, and improvements in the teaching process.

The admission to state funded universities is based on the result of competitive entrance examinations. When perspective students apply to a university they choose their program of study and specialization. Programs of specialization are structured around disability categories. Therefore, Special Education departments offer specialization in the study of individuals with specific disabilities. Further curricula are determined by a chosen program and specialization and are aimed to provide students with broad knowledge in individuals with different exceptionalities and expertise in a field of specialization.

### *The American Context*

Although the USA established a national Department of Education in 1979, each of the 50 states has its own State Department of Education that controls teacher education programs and licensure. Thus, special education personnel preparation programs, curricula, resources, and degree requirements may vary from state to state. Therefore, the higher education system, and specifically special education teacher preparation, is decentralized and location-specific. Because the higher education systems are a state responsibility, the states have carried the larger share of funding higher education.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education ([NCATE] Standards, 1995), as the professional teacher accrediting organization, and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) have developed a set of

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professional standards for the preparation and licensure of special educators. In the United States, accreditation provides information to the public that an institute of higher education is capable of delivering what it promises and impacts the quality of teacher preparation (Wise, 1999). In order to be accredited by these two organizations, special education teacher preparation programs need to provide evidence that the standards are taught. The primary forms of documentation are course syllabi. However, these two organizations are moving toward a performance-based accreditation system, with much greater emphasis on assessment of teacher candidates' performance, including their knowledge base and demonstrated teaching skills. The CEC guidelines unify the field by articulating the content for special education teacher preparation programs. Approximately 275 colleges and universities have met the CEC's standards for the preparation and certification of special education teachers.

Selection and entry requirement to special education teacher preparation programs also vary. Most teacher education programs incorporate education courses and practice teaching into either a 4-year bachelor's degree or a 5-year program that may result in a master's degree. As noted above, most special education teacher preparation programs in institutions of higher education tend to reflect the teacher licensure standards of the state. Hence, many special education programs are structured around disability categories. However, many states group categories together, but these groupings vary from state to state. Instead of specific categorical labels, multicategorical terms are used to refer to the population of students with disabilities (e.g., mild/moderate needs and severe/profound needs for any category of disability). Since preparation programs must meet state standards, preparation programs typically follow state licensure frameworks. This means there is extraordinary diversity in how special education teachers are prepared.

### **Methodological Considerations**

#### **Research Sites**

This article is based primarily on findings

from field research conducted at three public-funded universities in Belgium, Russia, and the United States between 1996 and 2001. The Belgium university site is a comprehensive public-funded institution located in the Dutch-speaking North that enrolls approximately 23,000 students. The academic preparation of special educators is divided into two cycles, candidate-study and licentiate-study. In the first cycle (candidate-study) students choose the option "psychological and pedagogical sciences" and study general courses in psychology, education and special education. The first cycle takes two or three years of study. The second cycle (licentiate-study) takes three or four years of study and provides students with an in-depth study of orthopedagogics. Along with theoretical courses, curricula in orthopedagogics requires three practical preparation experiences: two months of practical training at the beginning of the first licentiate year, eight-week practical training abroad during the second year of licentiate, and practical training related to thesis during the third year of licentiate. Upon successful defense of thesis, graduates are awarded degree "licentiate" (equivalent to Master's degree) with qualification in orthopedagogics.

The Russian site is a teachers' preparation university in the country's capital that enrolls approximately 12,400 students. This pedagogical university is organized into 18 faculties (colleges) for the preparation of teachers of pedagogical education. The Special Education faculty offers four specializations: mental retardation, deaf and hard of hearing, speech and language therapy, and early childhood special education. Prospective students choose their specialization prior to entering the program. All programs are accredited by the Ministry of Education and require five years of study. Curricula consist of courses in humanities, math, and sciences; general pedagogies and psychology; and special education. This coursework is distributed throughout the first 4 years of preparation; however, over 60% of the coursework is comprised of courses in special education (defectology). Courses in special education and a field of specialization are supported by broad practical experience in the field. During the first year of study, students participate in obser-

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vations of children with disabilities in a variety of educational and remedial settings. From the second year, students acquire practical experiences in working with children and adults with disabilities, which comprise their field of specialization. Practical training during the fifth year lasts for one semester and is aimed to integrate students' knowledge in assessment, intervention, and teaching methodology, and apply this knowledge into practice. Practical training is organized in special kindergartens and schools for children with disabilities and is carried out under supervision of specialists and university professors. The graduation process consists of thesis defense and state examination. Upon successful defense of thesis and completion of state examination the degree of "specialist" is awarded (equivalent to Master's degree).

Similar to the Belgium site, the American site is a comprehensive state land-grant university in the southeastern region of the country that enrolls approximately 26,000 students. The special education teacher preparation programs are accredited by NCATE, CEC, and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The special education program for initial teacher licensure is a five-year process. Students earn a baccalaureate degree in special education at the end of the fourth year. During the fifth year, students complete requirements for a teaching license and can, if desired, complete requirements for a Master's degree. The special education program offers four different licensure areas in special education: cross-categorical program for grades K-12, deaf and hard of hearing, audiology and speech pathology, and early childhood special education. Admission into the special education teacher education programs normally occurs during the middle of the second year. Thus, students take the required general education courses, which are usually in the areas of liberal arts, sciences, and humanities, during their first two years. After formal admission into the special education teacher education program, students complete the required coursework in regular and special education program areas. Field experiences in a variety of educational settings serving students with special needs are infused during the fourth year. After completion of the undergraduate special educa-

tion degree program, students complete a graduate professional year of study, which emphasizes practical application and integrative coursework through a year-long internship in the public schools. Interns are placed with a mentoring teacher and receive extensive clinical assistance. In addition, a university-mentoring professor provides periodic and frequent formative evaluations of the intern's progress and a summative evaluation as a basis for determining the completion for the internship credit.

### *Data Sources*

Research methods utilized in this study include qualitative in-depth interviewing, observations and the analysis of documents. Over the period of research, approximately 88 interviews (unstructured and semi-structured) were conducted with a range of subjects: higher education administrators (n = 5), higher education faculty (n = 30), special education teachers (n = 20), preservice teachers (n = 30), and researchers (n = 3) who were associated with the three universities. Interviews were loosely structured around the following themes and specific issues: (1) history of the special education teacher preparation programs, (2) structure and qualifications, (3) population of students and faculty, (4) definition of special education, (5) professional roles and responsibilities, (6) study programs, and (7) scholarly activities.

Observations focused on a broad range of details about the special education teacher preparation programs that were not accessible through interviews. For instance, a closer look at the quality of buildings, libraries, classrooms, equipment, textbooks, students' behavior, and teaching methodology. Analysis of documents was based on relevant media, scholarly, and governmental publications as well as university documents collected during the field studies (e.g., study plans, curricular guides, timetables, and other items). Interviews and documents were subjected to qualitative textual analysis using the process of constant comparison methods described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Member checks were used to ensure the credibility

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and trustworthiness of the data and not the biases and perceptions of the investigators.

**Findings**

The first objective of this study was to examine the historical and philosophical backgrounds of preparing special education teachers. The comparison of three special education teacher preparation programs is more than a comparison of three educational systems. Rather the differences in training special educators are determined by a chain of social, cultural, and historical factors that at the same time are influenced by political forces calling for educational reform.

The term orthopedagogics is used in the Dutch speaking countries of Europe including Belgium. Orthopedagogics is used to analyze the problematical educational situation in terms of a failing dialogue and at the same time to create a new perspective. According to the Chair of the Department of Orthopedagogics,

The orthopedagogical action is described as active, global and functional. It involves children or adults with a handicap, educators, and environmental situations in a whole. It integrates feelings, thinking and willing through doing. From this point of view the holistic approach in orthopedagogics is derived.

Thus this definition does not focus on a handicapping condition nor on a person with a disability but on a whole situation; it denies the 'defect' and as a consequence 'special approach.'

Similarly, in the United States the term 'special education' has taken on a much broader view. With the passage of recent legislation, including the Individuals with Disabilities Act ([IDEA], 1997), the federal government has taken an expanded role in the education of students with disabilities. Thus, these legal mandates affect special education and students in those programs. In addition, school reform in special education builds on IDEA's strong pro-inclusion provision and the role of collaboration in advancing inclusion. IDEA mandates that students with disabilities receive their education with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. With this concept of least restrictive

environment, the philosophy of social inclusion recognizes and accepts the range of human differences within a culture.

The 1997 Amendments to the IDEA align special education policies with standards-based reform. In the context of standards-based reform, new special education procedures require greater focus on how a student with a disability will access and progress in the general education curriculum. With this focus on learning in general education, "special education" takes on new meaning, although the definition of special education in the legal statute has not changed. The provision of specialized instruction necessitates that educators adapt the content, methodology, or instructional delivery of the general education curriculum in ways that allow students with disabilities to have full or partial involvement in all aspects of the general curriculum. Providing access to the general education curriculum creates a need for increased collaboration and communication between general and special education teachers.

The term defectology focuses on the physiological, psychological, pedagogical and social characteristics of children with special needs and their upbringing and education (Sutton, 1988). It includes relevant branches of medicine and psychology as well as pedagogy. In theoretical works by L.S. Vygotsky, the founder of defectology as a science in Russia, the aim of defectology is social adaptation; the compensation of deficiency "through specially organized process of remediation," and the role of the social environment is considerable in this process (Veresov, 1999, p. 136). He stressed the notion of development as growing out of the interaction of humans with one another, especially the interaction of adults and children, which offers a distinctively collectivist vision of human psychological growth, substantially different from Western (and particularly American) ideas of radical individualism (i.e., behaviorism). He also warned that special education should not focus exclusively on a deficient function; rather, it should consider a child in a larger social context. Thus, special educational approaches are useful and important as long as they help a child be integrated into a larger social context.

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Under Soviet times, the education of children with disabilities in special schools was believed to be the most effective way of preparing children with disabilities for integration into society (Sutton, 1988). The goal of the special schools is to teach the same basic skills, knowledge, and attitudes as taught to every Russian child but through a combination of special curriculum and methods, ancillary paramedical staff, smaller classes, specially trained teachers, and extra years to master the curriculum. During the 1990s, Russia passed a draft of legislation and decrees affirming children's rights to education, health, and special protection against the hardships and upheaval wrought by economic reform (Human Rights Watch, 1998). The Russian Federation was among the first nations to sign and ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. In addition, the Federal Law on Education (Adopted in 1996) guarantees "accessible and free" primary and secondary education ("Everything Begins," 1998). As a result, the terms 'special or correctional education' and 'defectology' are used interchangeably with the aim not only to provide an education which offers the best way of compensating for a specific disability but also on successful integration into the larger social context. This shift in view on the aims of special education has begun to change the curricula of special education teacher preparation programs. New courses that incorporate the study of families, group dynamics, and other social issues have been introduced.

The provision and meaning of special education in each country influences the program components, curriculum, teaching methodology, and field-based experiences. For example, the American special education program facilitates increased inclusion through both general education and special education placements of their preservice students. In addition, students take many of the same courses as their peers seeking general education licensure. Thus the concepts of inclusion and collaboration are considered in the development and planning of curriculum and field based experiences. Students are certified with a cross categorical license so coursework and training does not focus on a specific disability. On the other hand, the

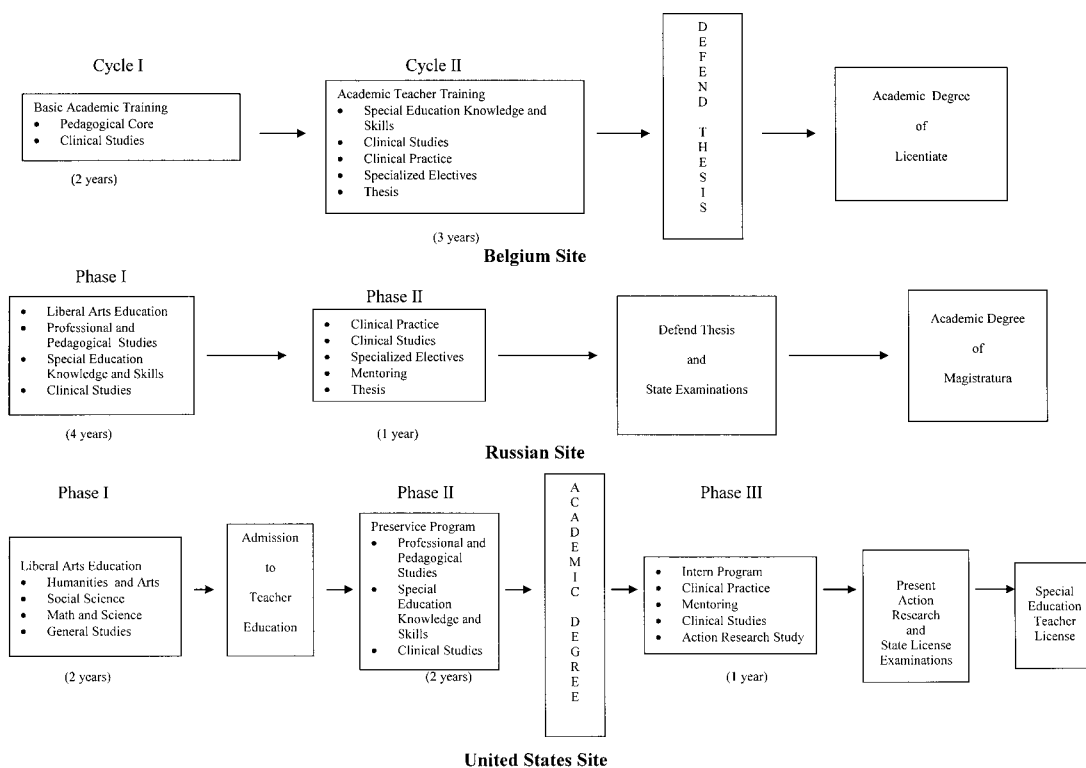
curriculum and field-based experiences in the Russian special education teacher preparation program are more specialized and focus on specific methods and practical training in special schools for children with specific disabilities. In comparison, the curriculum and field based experiences at the Belgium special education teacher preparation program focus on the understanding of the whole situation surrounding an individual with a disability and aims to train orthopedagogics without a specialization so they can work in a variety of institutions, centers, and organizations.

The second objective of this study was to identify common features and content of study programs in special education. Figure 1 outlines the scope and sequence of the curriculum and progression to academic degree and license at each university site. These institutional and curriculum variables are determined by the challenges and demands of the professional field and the traditions in preparing special educators.

All three university sites are state-funded public institutions with similar enrollments in teacher preparation of special educators. All three universities provide a five-year teacher preparation program and, upon completion, the equivalent of a Master's degree. Coursework consists of theoretical knowledge and skills in special education as well as a variety of field based experiences. Educational foundation courses, such as Philosophy of Education, Human Development, and Sociology of Education are included in the curriculum. All students are required to conduct a research project prior to graduation.

However, there are many differences among the programs due to special education reform efforts and the sociopolitical climate in each country. As discussed previously, the inclusion movement has changed the special education teacher preparation programs in Belgium and United States. The preparation of defectologists is still highly specialized from the very beginning of a student's educational program due to the tradition of students selecting their field of specialization prior to entering higher education. These specialized subjects comprise between 60–70% of the overall timetable and prepare students to work with a distinct category of dis-

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**Figure 1.** Initial Special Education Teacher Preparation

ability and the special methods of educating children with the disability. However, efforts have been made to render the nature of courses more suitable to the needs of the contemporary school, in line with the direction of reform.

Another major difference is the specific content of the study programs. In Russia, particular attention in work with children with different impairments is drawn towards their language development. According to Vygotsky (1962), language is a crucial medium for transmission of culture and formation of higher mental functions. Hence, study of formal language, normal and impaired language development, methods of language remediation and intervention is strongly emphasized in curricula of special education programs. In addition, courses in medicine focusing on developmental anatomy, physiology, neurology, and general pathology are required.

Unlike their Belgium counterparts, preservice teachers at the Russian and American

sites are required to take coursework in general studies (humanities, sciences, math) in addition to their professional core. The difference, however, is that in Russia this coursework is taken simultaneously with the coursework in special education and field of specialization and only takes up about 20% of the overall study program. In contrast, at the United States site the general education coursework is conducted during the first 2 to 3 years of study and comprises approximately 60% of the 5-year study program. However, the 5-year model allows for a year-long school-based internship that is woven together with coursework on learning and teaching.

The third objective focused on the professional role and activity of special educators. In Belgium and United States, the term 'inclusion' does have a substantive and distinctive meaning; it marks a shift from the notion that students with special education needs should be placed in mainstream schools *where possible* to the belief that they



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should be educated in mainstream schools as of *right*. Thus the study programs, professional roles and activities of preservice teachers, and clinical experiences of these two special education programs reflect this philosophy of inclusive education. Development of professional skills that support inclusion has been added to the large cluster of competencies that form the common core of knowledge, performances, and dispositions that are desired outcomes of preparation programs for special education professionals.

The professional role of defectologists is to provide early diagnostics and appropriate intervention programs for children with disabilities for their further successful inclusion into mainstream education. For this purpose, special education services are available for children of all ages and in a variety of settings. However, there is no legal procedure that mandates the principle of inclusion. This creates serious obstacles for the practice of inclusion. Evidence of official government rhetoric towards inclusive education is noted, but rigorous academic requirements in public schools, the lack of special support services in regular schools, and the absence of a model for integration (inclusion) hinder the conditions for including children with disabilities into mainstream education.

The clinical studies and practice is also influenced by the professional activity of the special educator in each country. In the Russian and American sites, the majority of clinical practice is in classrooms within public school settings. Although the major field of activity for defectologist is in special schools for children grouped by a handicapping condition, the preservice special educator in America usually gains experience in regular education settings. On the other hand, the orthopedagogical field of activity is carried out in a variety of settings including public school systems, regional guidance centers, foster care and special youth care organizations. These practical experiences involve the managing and guidance of problematic situations through consultations and collaboration with other professionals and parents.

The fourth research objective explored the state of teacher preparation and the different perspectives on the education of teachers in special education. In all three countries, uni-

versity education has a long tradition and the particular features of the different special education programs have taken shape by the current efforts to reform teacher education. In the United States, IDEA requires that students with disabilities are educated, to the maximum extent appropriate, with students without disabilities. Similarly, legislative policy in Belgium requires that students with special needs be integrated into mainstream education. Thus the development of legislation and policy to promote the successful inclusion of individuals with disabilities in society has led the preparation of special educators to be supported by more generic knowledge and research bases in these two countries. In contrast, the preparation of special educators in Russia is supported by the traditions of special education as a special teaching of children with a specific disability that have resulted in highly specialized methodologies and curriculum.

Conditions arising from the mode of decision-making and control over the educational system also differ by country. In a centralized system the demands for change have to be accumulated, aggregated and articulated at the political center. They have to be negotiated in the central political arena, and, if they are accepted, they are then transmitted downward to educational institutions as policy-directed changes. In a decentralized system not all demands have to be passed upward to the political center. Some can be negotiated autonomously within educational institutions, others can be dealt with independently by external interests groups.

These two extremes in the nature of decision-making structure are not absolute. In Belgium, a certain mixture of these extremes exists. The Belgium model consists of a centralized framework on the general level (admission requirements) within which there is quite a large amount of decision-making over the curriculum and qualification of special educators at the local level. In the United States, a country with its constitutionally decentralized system of education, a distinct tendency to centralization is currently appearing by means of national organizations establishing national standards for special education teacher licensure. Russia with its centralized system of higher education is moving

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toward regionalization of the responsibility for education and teacher preparation.

### Discussion of Comparative Findings

The goal of this article was not to suggest universal generalizations, but rather to inform us about the nature of special education teacher preparation. The three higher education university settings are unlikely to be representative of all universities preparing special education teachers. Thus, the findings of this study should be generalized cautiously since they represent special education teacher preparation programs in one region of each country. Each country has its own historical context in which the structure of higher education has taken shape and the special education program has evolved. However, the findings from this study provide us with an understanding that the context of teacher education in special education is greatly influenced by the cultural, sociopolitical, and historical beliefs of each country. These critical influences on current and future special education teacher education programs reflect the dynamic nature of our profession and communities.

Some major problems and issues today confront all special education teacher preparation programs regardless of their separate origins and distinctive characteristics. At the present time, increasing numbers of countries are declaring their hands in favor of inclusion (OECD, 1993; UNESCO, 1994; NCSNET & NCESS, 1997). Such declaration means that the roles and responsibilities of special education professionals are changing and growing rapidly. Recently, there is much discussion about creating alternative routes to special education teacher certification than those provided by university-based teacher education programs (Buck, Polloway, & Robb, 1995). Our findings suggest that a 5-year model allows an extended program of preparation for prospective special education teachers. Thus, the university's continuing role in preparing special education teachers is even more necessary today.

The three countries share similarities. All want greater teacher competence and quality, a better balance of theory and practice in teacher preparation, and collaborative rela-

tionships with schools. The inclusion of children with disabilities in general education settings also is a common thread among the three countries. However, philosophical and practical enigmas persist. To add to the confusion, the system of financing special education may inhibit the inclusion of children with disabilities within general education (Pijl & Dyson, 1998).

Belgium, Russia, and the United States have differences of a social, political, and cultural nature and enjoy standards of living that vary, but they have a common view regarding the importance of education for students with disabilities. Taken together, what all of these findings suggest is that the special education teacher education programs are at varying distances depending on the destination (e.g., teacher education reform, inclusive practices, shortages, standards). However, it is reassuring that these programs seem to be traveling the same road together.

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Sharon Judge, Ph.D.\*\*, University of Tennessee.  
Maria Oreshkina, Moscow State Pedagogical University