

Factors Influential to Teacher Candidates' Decision to Pursue Special Education Careers

Philip D. Nordness¹, Elizabeth M. Leader-Janssen¹, Kristine D. Swain¹ & Diedra A. Reeves¹

¹ College of Education Health & Human Sciences, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Correspondance: Philip Nordness, College of Education Health & Human Sciences, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska. 6001 Dodge Street, Omaha, NE 68182, USA.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate students' reasons they would or would not choose to major in special education. Given the chronic shortage of special education teachers, it is essential to understand the variables that may influence an undergraduate student to choose a career in special education so that recruitment strategies can be effectively developed. The results from 121 survey respondents indicated that most students decided to pursue a career in special education in high school, or college, to make a difference in the lives of K-12 students. In addition, those individuals who chose to pursue a career in special education had previous experience with individuals with disabilities.

Keywords: endorsement, special education, teachers, teacher shortage

1. Introduction

The problem of supply and demand for special education teachers has been well documented over the last three decades (Boe & Cook, 2006; Katsiyannis et al., 2003; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; McLeskey et al., 2004; Smith-Davis & Billingsley, 1993; Zhang et al., 2013). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2021), 49 states and the District of Columbia reported teacher shortages in the area of special education in 2020–2021. Furthermore, in the American Association for Employment in Education educator's supply and demand report, all 10 special education subgroups were listed as experiencing considerable shortages by universities/colleges and school districts in the 2019–2020 school year. These numbers have been static for the last three decades and demonstrate that the shortage of special education teachers is chronic and long-term without improvement over the last 30–40 years.

The purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was to ensure that all children with disabilities would have access to a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services to meet their unique needs. Unfortunately, the shortage of special education teachers has significantly impeded the ability of schools to provide quality services for children with disabilities and their families (Smith et al., 2010). In fact, special education has never fully benefitted from having a qualified workforce to deliver on the promise of a free appropriate public education for all students, including those with disabilities (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). This is significant when considering that approximately 63% of students with disabilities are instructed in general education settings for at least 80% of the day or more (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Many general education teacher preparation programs do not provide training on academic accommodations and behavior management strategies to support students with disabilities in general education settings (Zhang et al., 2013). This has serious implications when we consider that students with disabilities continue to lag behind their non-disabled peers on measures of academic performance, standardized testing, graduation, dropout, and rates of expulsion and school suspension (Heward et al., 2017).

The shortage of special education teachers is primarily due to a higher demand and a significantly low supply of teacher candidates considering special education (Zhang et al., 2013). While teacher attrition and turnover have been frequently mentioned as a reason for the shortage of special education teachers, an inadequate supply of special education teacher candidates exacerbates this shortage (Boe et al., 2008). Overall enrollment in teacher education programs has decreased by 22% from 2009–2010 to 2018–2019 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), which has also been reflected in special education enrollments. Several factors might explain declining enrollments in teacher preparation programs for special education. First, current compensation levels related to

the profession of teaching are inadequate to attract the best students (Park & Bryun, 2015). Second, obtaining special education certification often requires more schooling than what is required of general education teacher certification. Therefore, it takes longer to complete the degree and requires more financial investment. Third, in rural areas, geographic isolation makes it difficult for teachers to access the additional coursework necessary to be certified in special education (Sundeen & Wienke, 2017). While online instructional options continue to increase, state requirements for certification can hinder those efforts if the online degree institution is from another state. Fourth, recruiting minority teacher candidates to become special education teachers has been an ongoing challenge. As cited in Gargiulo and Bouck (2019), approximately 48% of students with disabilities are from diverse backgrounds, whereas approximately 18% of special education teachers are from minority backgrounds. Reasons for the lack of diversity among special education teachers may be related to previous lack of representation in the field, financial pressures, and other systemic issues regarding the historical treatment of minorities, particularly young Black males, in special education (Scott & Alexander, 2019). In addition, the teacher preparation field has historically been based on a set of expectations developed on a white cultural model of professionalism (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2019). This approach may ultimately disenfranchise teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds who do not adhere to that model.

Finally, the numerous challenges within the field are well documented and known to potential candidates before choosing a career in special education. Issues with certification, high-stress work environment, paperwork, lack of support, teacher burnout, and teacher safety have been well documented in the press and media (Johnson et al., 2009; Mason-Williams et al., 2017; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). All of these issues combine to create barriers that make it challenging to recruit teacher candidates into special education.

In recognition of these barriers to recruiting special education teachers, several solutions have been proposed to increase special education teacher retention and recruitment. First and foremost is the need for additional or increased compensation for special education teachers. It has been well documented that an increase in salary or compensation does improve teacher recruitment (Billingsly, 2004; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). A larger salary may be more attractive to pre-service teachers who recognize that special education often requires additional coursework, which adds to the financial burden of pursuing certification. Second, federal investment in personnel preparation through grants and scholarships. Scholarships and grants to support students in paying for these additional courses can lessen the financial burden of special education certification. The Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education

(TEACH) grant is one federal program that supports teachers in shortage areas, but the criterion to be eligible makes it difficult for many students to be supported through the grant. Third, many teachers leave the field of special education because of a lack of administrative support and knowledge of special education practices (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Ensuring administrators receive the proper training and preparation to support special education personnel and students is crucial to recruiting and retaining special education teachers. Finally, alternative routes (AR) to special education certification need to be continually examined to see if there are more efficient and cost-effective approaches to preparing special education teachers and ensuring they are appropriately certified.

In addition to considering these solutions to increasing special education recruitment and retention, there is still a need to understand the variables that may impact an individual's decision to pursue a career in special education while in college (Zhang et al., 2013). Zascavage et al. (2008) surveyed undergraduate special education majors from eight universities in Texas to determine what variables and recruitment strategies might increase the number of students going into special education. The results of their study found that contact with individuals with disabilities was the most significant factor in influencing their decision to go into special education. After that, peer support group participation, committee activities, and tuition scholarships were the leading variables that led to choosing to major in special education. Similarly, in a study conducted by Zhang et al. (2013), surveys were distributed to 214 undergraduate students to determine the motivation behind novice education majors' decision to pursue a degree in special education. Believing that having a career in special education would amount to positive life outcomes was a strong predictor of pursuing a special education degree. Additionally, prior experience with individuals with disabilities impacted these preservice teachers' interest in pursuing special education as a career (Zhang et al., 2013).

Previous research has identified strategies that teacher preparation programs can utilize to recruit special education teacher candidates better. Providing high school and undergraduate students with opportunities to engage with individuals with disabilities is one of the most highly suggested strategies noted in the literature (Stephens & Fish, 2010; Sundeen & Wienke, 2009; Zascavage et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2013). Preservice and in-service teachers should also be given a chance to shadow special education teachers to learn how they

positively impact the overall well-being of P-12 students with disabilities (Stephens & Fish, 2010; Reeves et al., 2021). In addition to shadowing opportunities, universities should put on special educator workshops to answer potential candidates' questions regarding special education teachers' responsibilities (Rice & Goessling, 2005). Furthermore, teacher preparation programs can incentivize pursuing a degree in special education by providing scholarships to students who major in special education (Reeves et al., 2021). Lastly, participants noted the importance of school districts collaborating with local colleges and universities to recruit teacher candidates directly from teacher preparation programs (Stephens & Fish, 2010). Providing connections to local districts is an excellent way to offer additional experiences for teacher candidates.

These studies provide a starting point for examining variables that may influence a student's desire to pursue a degree in special education and have shed light on recruitment techniques. The objective of the current study was to survey undergraduate college students who were taking an introductory course in special education to determine what variables may influence their decision to go into special education.

2. Methods

2.1 Respondents

The respondents were undergraduate students enrolled in a Midwest university's Introduction to Special Education course. The Introduction to Special Education course serves as a general education diversity requirement so the course is open to all students at the university. Therefore, the course includes both education majors and those not intending to pursue teacher certification. For special education majors, Intro to Special Education is the first course they take in the sequence of special education coursework.

2.2 Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study and completion of the survey was not required for the students. The completion of the survey was anonymous and no identifying information was collected other than demographic information for analytical purposes.

2.3 Data Gathering Procedure

During the Fall and Spring semesters of 2020–2021, professors teaching the seven sections (two in person and five online) of Introduction to Special Education asked students to complete the survey. The professors either explained the purpose of the survey in class or via email and administered the survey online through Qualtrics. The professors sent out two email reminders to complete the survey. Consent was obtained through the introductory paragraph in the survey, with confidentiality maintained for participants who agreed to participate in the study.

2.4 Survey Development

A research study conducted by DeSutter and LeMire (2016) had a similar aim to determine why students would choose special education over general education in two institutions in the Midwest. The survey used in that study was modified for this study by the authors and examined by a group of experts in the field of special education. The first version of the survey was piloted with a small group of undergraduate students majoring in special education. Feedback was received by the students, and the survey was revised. Additionally, the researchers were engaged in a consortium that examined special education teacher shortage. This consortium focused on current practices for recruiting and retaining special education teachers and determining strategies that could be utilized across the U.S. to increase the number of educators adding special education certification. This group of experts examined the survey and provided feedback. The survey was revised and expanded to understand the recruitment and retainment of special education majors in higher education.

2.5 Survey Instrument

The purpose of the survey was to identify factors and experiences that have influenced participants' decision to pursue (or not pursue) a teaching career, license, and/or endorsement in special education. The survey had a total of 26 questions and included three parts. Part I contained ten items that examined students' teaching profession interests. Part II contained six items that asked questions about going into the profession into the teacher preparation program. Part III contains ten items participants' demographic and program information.

2.6 Data Analysis

Descriptive data was used to analyze the frequency of responses. Percentages were also used to explain the data. The results can be viewed in Tables 1–5.

3. Results

Of the 220 students enrolled in the course, 121 students (55%) completed the survey. Most of the students were either Freshmen (48.33%) or Sophomores (28.33%), and the gender of the respondents was primarily female (91%). Eighty percent of the respondents identified as White, whereas 10 percent identified as Hispanic, and 4 percent identified as Black or African-American. The majority of participants were pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree (74.11%), followed by a Bachelor of Arts Degree (23.21%), or a Post-Baccalaureate Degree (2.68%). See Table 1 for complete demographic information.

Table 1. Student demographics

Race/Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	97	80.84
Hispanic/Latinx	13	10.83
Black/African American	5	4.17
Asian	2	1.67
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1	0.83
Multi-racial	1	0.83
Other	1	0.83
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	--	--
Gender		
Female	108	90.76
Male	11	9.24
Non-binary	--	--
Fluid	--	--
Students' Education Level		
Freshman	58	48.34
Sophomore	34	28.33
Junior	17	14.17
Senior	10	8.33
Post-graduate	1	0.83

Most of the students decided they wanted to become a special education teacher in college ($n = 30$; 55%) or high school ($n = 22$; 41%) with two (4%) identified elementary school. The factor that influenced that decision the most was wanting to “make a difference in the lives of students” and from their own “personal experience with a person(s) with disabilities.” See Table 2 for factors that influenced participants' education major choice.

Table 2. Factors that influenced education major choice

Factors	<i>n</i>	%
What factor(s) influenced your decision to become a teacher the most?		
Make a difference in the lives of students	83	30.30
Inspiring teacher	52	18.98
Passion for learning	45	16.43
Personal experiences with person(s) with disabilities	31	11.31
Flexible summers and vacation time	27	9.85
Ideal work hours	12	4.38
Desire to close the opportunity gap	11	4.01
Job availability	8	2.92
Salary/living conditions	5	1.82
What factor(s) influenced your decision to become a special education teacher the most?		
Make a difference in the lives of students	56	29.64
Personal experiences with person(s) with disabilities	51	26.98
Inspiring teacher	24	12.70
Passion for learning	21	11.11
Desire to close the opportunity gap	18	9.52
Job availability	8	4.23
Flexible summers and vacation time	6	3.17
Ideal work hours	3	1.59
Salary/living conditions	2	1.06

Twenty-one percent of the respondents noted that no individual influenced their decision to pursue an endorsement in special education, whereas 19.5% identified family members, and 17.6% mentioned: “knowing a person with a disability” (see Table 3).

Table 3. Individuals who influenced education major choice

	<i>n</i>	%
Which individual(s) influenced your decision to become a special education teacher?		
No one individual	35	21.33
Family (i.e., parents, siblings, other family members)	32	19.51
A person with a disability who I know or know of	29	17.68
K-12 Teachers	20	12.20
Friends	18	10.98
University Professors	16	9.76
Other	11	6.71
School counselor	3	1.83

Table 4 documents that 43% of students had experiences working with children prior to pursuing a teaching degree and 21% worked as a volunteer with youth with disabilities.

Table 4. Student experiences

Statements	<i>n</i>	%
Of the statements, which is/are true about your experience?		
I worked with children prior to pursuing my teaching degree	92	42.99
I worked with youth with disabilities as a volunteer, camp counselor, youth group leaders, etc. prior to pursuing my teaching degree	45	21.03
I worked in a school setting as a tutor, paraprofessional, or support personnel prior to pursuing my teaching degree	36	16.82
I worked as a camp counselor/staff prior to pursuing my teaching degree	27	12.62
None of the above	14	6.54
What support(s) did you receive during your K-12 educational experience?		
None of the above	98	76.56
Other	13	10.16
Special Education Services via an Individualized Education Program (IEP)	10	7.81
Accommodations via a 504 Accommodation Plan	7	5.47

Of the factors that would make an endorsement in special education appealing, 23.5% identified increased salary and benefits, followed by “positive perceptions and increased respectability of special educator’s role” (21.4%). Streamlining endorsement requirements was the least identified factor in making an endorsement in special education more appealing (see Table 5).

Table 5. Reasons and career benefits for selecting special education

Reasons	<i>n</i>	%
If you are pursuing a teaching endorsement in Special Education, why?		
To meet the needs of struggling learners	52	36.11
Enhance professional development and teaching abilities	39	27.08
Other	22	15.28
More job opportunities available	18	12.50
To increase marketability as a teacher	13	9.03
What would make a special education endorsement appealing to you?		
Increased salary and benefits	67	23.50
Positive perceptions and increased respectability of special educator’s role	61	21.40
Low cost/affordability to pursue endorsement	40	14.04
Clarify around support for special educators	40	14.04
Increased and explicit opportunities for advancement (i.e., administration)	33	11.58
Reduced demand of special education (i.e., caseload, paperwork)	28	9.82
Streamlined endorsement requirements	9	3.16
Other	7	2.46

4. Discussion

According to the American Association for Employment in Education (AAEE) Educator Supply and Demand report (2019–2020), the top ways to attract high school students into education careers are to 1) offer compensation incentives, 2) promote the prestige of the profession, 3) high school to college teacher education pipeline and 4) getting students involved in education from elementary to high school (AAEE, 2020). While most students in our study decided that they wanted to become a special education teacher in college (55.5%), a large percentage of students (40.7%) decided in high school. This is significant when we consider strategies for recruiting students to consider an endorsement in special education. Two options to consider at the high school level is dual enrollment course offerings and education academies. Dual enrollment courses are a collaboration between a university and a high school to offer college equivalent courses at the high school setting for college credit. A dual enrollment course would enable a high school student to take an introductory course in special education to see if it would be a career they would be interested in pursuing. High school dual enrollment programs and other marketing strategies to reach out to middle school and high students may have an impact on increasing the number of students who consider pursuing an endorsement in special education when they come to college. Education academies are becoming part of many high school curriculums. A course in special education might be included to increase the awareness and understanding of special education. Special education is a very expansive term, but it is not necessarily understood by middle and high schoolers. Therefore, early exposure to special education coursework may provide students with a better understanding of careers in special education.

Another area to address is the perception of teachers. Twenty-one percent of our respondents identified “positive perceptions” and “increased respectability” as variables that would increase the likelihood of pursuing a career in special education. Currently, the perception of teachers is at an all-time low, and the impact of the pandemic has intensified the difficulties and immense challenges of teachers. Improved perceptions and increased respectability of special education teachers might make a special education endorsement more appealing.

For students who have decided they want to become a special education teacher, the most significant influence on their decision was their previous experiences working with children with disabilities and a desire to make a difference in lives of students. This is consistent with previous research (Zascavage et al., 2008), which found that interaction with individuals with disabilities was the most significant factor in influencing undergraduate students’ decision to go into special education. Interestingly, work hours and salary were the least important factors in their decision to become special education teachers for this same group. However, for those students who have not yet considered seeking an endorsement in special education, the number one variable that would make it more appealing was an increase in salary and benefits. Therefore, if we want individuals with little or no experience with individuals with disabilities to pursue special education, a shift in the pay structure could be a recruitment tool.

In addition to the issues related to salary and affordability for pursuing endorsement, support for special education teachers was also identified as a factor that would make special education more appealing. This is consistent with previous research, which has noted that making scholarships and incentives more readily available might make pursuing a degree in special education more attractive and financially affordable (Reeves et al., 2021). The State Department of Education can provide additional support and incentives for teachers. In the State of Nebraska, there are two different programs Attracting Excellence to the Teaching Program (AETP) and Enhancing Excellence in Teaching Program (EETP). It was interesting that streamlining endorsement requirements was not identified as one of the primary issues for students. Obtaining certification often requires additional coursework and increasing demands upon students for additional practicum hours, however, changes to streamline these requirements were not seen as a major factor in influencing a student’s decision to pursue an endorsement in special education.

5. Limitations

The results of this study provide some insight into the variables that may influence student candidates to consider pursuing an endorsement in special education. While this information is useful, we must consider a number of limitations in generalizing this information to the broader population. This study included a convenience sample of students from a Midwest urban University. Students from other locations and different Universities may have differing perspectives on what would influence them to pursue an endorsement in special education. Future research should include a more diverse sample of students from different locales and Universities to provide a more representative sample of responses. In addition, our survey instrument was developed with input from supportive professionals, however the psychometric properties related to reliability and validity were not

investigated. Future research should continue to investigate the reliability and validity of the survey instrument.

6. Recommendations

Despite the limitations of this study, the data supports much of what has been recognized in previous research. For instance, previous studies (Billingsley, 2004; Mason-Williams et al., 2020) have recognized the need to increase salaries and wages to make teaching special education more attractive to potential students. Unfortunately, the means to improve salary and wages lies with legislatures and politicians thereby making it difficult to implement. Nonetheless, there are things we can continue to develop that may help in the recruitment of pre-service teachers. First, 43% percent of respondents noted that they had previous experience working with individuals with disabilities. Institutions should continue to develop opportunities for students to interact and connect with children with disabilities through student social groups, practicum experiences, and community outreach. Second, although a significant number of students decided to pursue special education in college, a high percentage of students decided in high school. To attract young individuals to the teaching profession, there needs to be a significant effort to fund innovative pathways from high school to universities (CEEDAR Center & GTL, 2000). Statistics show that a majority of personnel work within 25 miles of the high school they attended (Krieg, Theobald, & Goldhaber, 2016), therefore school districts should consider funding or supporting college tuition for students who might consider returning to their districts as teachers. In addition, universities should collaborate with local high schools to provide dual enrollment courses in special education, participate in career fairs to promote special education and have a table at university open house admission days. Finally, universities should continue to conduct outreach activities into diverse communities to increase awareness of careers in special education for candidates from underrepresented groups.

It is worth noting that a lot of the research reported here on special education teacher shortages occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that the pandemic has greatly impacted special education teacher retention and recruitment, thereby making the supply and demand for special education teachers even greater than what has been previously reported. This further demonstrates the importance of the work ahead. Increasing the number of students entering the field of special education is critical and it will take stakeholders working together on multiple solutions from multiple pathways to have an impact.

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