

# Exploring Factors toward Pursuing a Career in Special Education

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**Abstract:** This study explored factors influencing an individual's decision to pursue a career in special education. 21 graduate students in the Southeast who were enrolled in a master's degree program in special education participated in a survey. The survey consisted of nine questions that allowed the participants to provide information about (a) their background, (b) factors which contributed toward pursuing a career in special education, and (c) recommendations for university teacher preparation programs to effectively recruit more special education teachers. The results were summarized quantitatively. The majority of the participants were pursuing special education certification as a second career. Although their backgrounds varied, they all reported having prior experiences with individuals with disabilities which influenced their decision. In addition, the most frequently stated that recommendation for university teacher preparation programs to recruit special educators was to provide more exposure and experiences with individuals with disabilities. Overall, the results highlighted the importance of experiences with individuals with disabilities in influencing one's decision to pursue a career in special education.

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## 0 Introduction

The chronic shortage of special education teachers continues to pose a significant challenge for schools across the United States<sup>[1,2]</sup>. In the 2017–2018 school

year, 46 states (92%) reported teacher shortages in special education<sup>[3]</sup>. To meet this demand, many school districts were left to fill vacant teaching positions with less than fully qualified personnel<sup>[4-6]</sup>. As a result of the national shortage of special educators, the quality of education that many students with disabilities are entitled to receive may be negatively impacted<sup>[7,8]</sup>.

Researchers have primarily investigated the causes of the shortage of certified special educators<sup>[4,9]</sup>. Some of those reasons include poor work environments such as demanding workloads, low salaries, increased stress, and lack of administrative support<sup>[10,11]</sup>. Other researchers have linked certain teacher characteristics and qualifications such as a lack of experience or insufficient preparation and training to a greater risk of attrition<sup>[12,13]</sup>.

Another contributing factor for the special education teacher shortage is an insufficient number of individuals enrolled in university teacher preparation programs to fill the need<sup>[14,15]</sup>. For example, Sutchter *et al.* reported that between 2009 and 2014 enrollment in teacher education programs decreased 35% from 691,000 to 451,000.

Although the majority of the research thus far has contributed to understanding why special educators leave the profession, there has been limited research examining the factors related to why individuals choose to enter the field of special education<sup>[2,7,6]</sup>. In one study, Fish and Stephens interviewed in-service teachers to understand why they decided to major in special education. The most commonly cited reason was having “the desire to serve those in need” (p. 402). Other reasons provided included having a family member or a friend with a disability and the availability of job openings. Other researchers have concluded that experiences with individuals with disabilities

influence an individual's interest in becoming a special educator<sup>[2,16]</sup>. For example, DeSutter and LeMire surveyed 146 undergraduate pre-service teachers at two rural Midwest universities and found that work or volunteer experience with individuals with disabilities was a significant predictor in choosing special education as a career.

Given the critical need to recruit more qualified special educators, understanding why individuals enter special education may provide useful information to recruit more individuals to the field. The purpose of this study was to explore factors influencing one's decision to pursue a career as a special educator. The following research questions were examined: (1) Why do individuals pursue a master's degree in special education?, (2) How do individuals become interested in a career in special education?, (3) Does prior experience related to individuals with disability influence one's decision to pursue a career in special education?, and (4) What can university teacher preparation programs do to effectively recruit more special education teaching candidates?.

## 1 Methods

### Participants

The participants were enrolled in a special education master's degree program at a large public university in the Southeastern United States. The participants were either in the traditional master of education program in special education or the alternative master of education program in special education. The traditional program (30-h) provides advanced study for teachers who already hold a teaching certificate in any field of education. The alternative program (42-h) provides a course of study for individuals with an undergraduate degree but no previous training in education. Both programs lead to a Master's Degree in Education (M.Ed.) in special education and certification in special education at either the elementary (K-6) or secondary level<sup>[4,5,7,10,13,17]</sup>. 21 graduate students were selected as a convenience sample given their enrollment in a required course, Behavior Management of Exceptional Children, taught by the author in the fall semester of 2017.

The participants included 18 (86%) females and 3 males (14%). 20 of the participants were Caucasian and one was African-American. 5 of the participants (24%) were between the ages of 20 and 25, 6 (28%) were between the ages of 26 and 30, and the remaining 10 participants

(48%) were over 30 years old. Participation was voluntary, and there were no identified risks or benefits for participating.

## 2 Procedure

An online survey was administered consisting of nine questions that allowed the participants to provide information about (a) their background, (b) factors which contributed toward pursuing a career in special education, and (c) recommendations for university teacher preparation programs to effectively recruit more special education teachers. The author developed the survey based on reviewing questions used in previous similar studies<sup>[7,11,17]</sup>.

The first five questions were closed ended and related to the participants' background (Appendix A). The following two questions<sup>[7,10]</sup> were open ended and related to factors that influenced the graduate students' decision to pursue a career in special education. The next question<sup>[17]</sup> consisted of two parts. The first part included a "yes" or "no" response, and if the participant answered "yes," they were asked to provide an explanation. The last question<sup>[13]</sup> asked for any recommendations that university teacher preparation programs could do to effectively recruit potential special education teaching candidates. The resulting data were summarized by grouping like responses; then, the total number of similar responses was divided by the total number of responses to determine the percentage of similar responses per question.

## 3 Results

The data were organized comparing the results between the participants in the traditional master's degree program and the alternative master's degree program. Of the total 21 participants, the majority (67%) were enrolled in the alternative program ( $n = 14$ ) and the remaining graduate students ( $n = 7$ ) were enrolled in the traditional program. The bachelor degree area of study for the participants is presented in Table 1. Some of the participants also held prior degrees in speech and hearing, history, music, agricultural business, and exercise science.

Table 2 represents the type of certification, if any, held by the participants. Among those seven participants enrolled in the traditional program, 57% were certified in collaborative education ( $n = 4$ ) and 43% ( $n = 3$ ) were certified in general education. All but one of the individuals in the traditional program ( $n = 6$ ) were

teaching in their certification area. Regarding the graduate students in the alternative program, 36% ( $n = 5$ ) were employed as special education teachers under an interim teaching certificate.

Table 3 represents the time period when the participants reported first becoming interested in pursuing a career in special education. Overall, 48% did not report an initial interest until after receiving their bachelor's degree. In contrast, 24% of the participants reported an initial interest during college, while 19% reported an initial interest during high school, and approximately 10% reported an initial interest in becoming a special educator before high school.

**Table 1: Bachelor degree area**

Field of study	Traditional	Alternative
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
General education	3 (43)	0 (0)
Special education	0 (0)	0 (0)
Collaborative education	4 (57)	0 (0)
Interdisciplinary studies	0 (0)	3 (22)
Psychology	0 (0)	2 (14)
Early childhood studies	0 (0)	2 (14)
Human development and family studies	0 (0)	2 (14)
Other	0 (0)	5 (36)
Total	7 (100)	14 (100)

**Table 2: Certification area**

Type of certification	Traditional	Alternative
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Special education	0 (0)	0 (0)
Regular education	3 (43)	0 (0)
Collaborative education	4 (57)	0 (0)
Interim certification	0 (0)	5 (36)
None	0 (0)	9 (64)
Total	7 (100)	14 (100)

**Table 3: Initial interest in pursuing special education career**

Timeline	Traditional master's students	Alternative master's students	Total (%)
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	
Before high school	1 (14)	1 (8)	9
High school	1 (14)	3 (21)	19
College	3 (43)	2 (14)	24
Post-bachelor's	2 (29)	8 (57)	48
Total	7 (100)	14 (100)	100

The first research question explored reasons why individuals choose to pursue a master's degree in special education. The participants' responses were grouped into three main reasons. Thirty-three percent of the participants ( $n = 7$ ) reported that they were doing so to increase their knowledge and improve their skills to become (better) teachers. Twenty-nine percent of the participants ( $n = 6$ ) reported doing so to obtain teacher certification in special education, and the remaining 29% of the participants ( $n = 6$ ) provided more altruistic reasons such as having a place in their heart for individuals with disabilities or to make a difference in both their lives and individuals with disabilities. For example, one participant stated, "I chose special education because the challenges involved interested me and I also felt like the rewards involved would be greater and worth the challenges." Another participant wrote, "I believe it is my calling to help students with disabilities." Other reasons provided included the desire to work with a smaller number of students more closely ( $n = 1$ ) and being unable to obtain a position as a speech therapist ( $n = 1$ ).

The second research question pertained to how individuals became interested in a career in special education. 95% of the participants ( $n = 20$ ) reported having experiences with individuals with disabilities which influenced their decision. The type of experience varied among the participants. Some reported having experiences with individuals with a disability either as a student ( $n = 3$ ), as a volunteer at camp ( $n = 4$ ), or Special Olympics ( $n = 1$ ). 35% of the participants stated that their experience as either a general education teacher ( $n = 1$ ), Parapro ( $n = 2$ ), or substitute teacher ( $n = 4$ ) with individuals with disabilities influenced their interest in special education. Other experiences reported were during an undergraduate practicum ( $n = 2$ ) and physical therapy clinic ( $n = 1$ ). One participant reported being influenced by hearing about the experiences of

**Table 4: Prior experience**

Prior experience	Traditional master's students	Alternative master's students	Total (%)
	Frequency (%) Yes	Frequency (%) Yes	
Prior experience with individuals with disabilities	7 (100)	14 (100)	100
Prior experience considered influential	6 (95)	14 (100)	95

a family member who was a special education teacher, and another stated that her own experiences with a hearing disability influenced her decision to become a special educator.

The third research question examined whether prior experiences with individuals with disabilities influence one's decision to pursue a career in education. On the survey, the participants were asked two questions relating to this. Table 4 presents the participant's responses to each question. The first question asked whether participants had prior experiences with individuals with disabilities before deciding to pursue a career in special education. In response to this question, all of the participants (100%) indicated yes. The second question asked whether that prior experience influenced their decision to pursue a career in special education and if yes to explain. In response to this question, one of the participants left this question blank, but the remaining 95% of the participants indicated yes. Examples of some of the additional responses included, *“Working with kids with disabilities brought joy to me because I was able to teach them something that they didn't know before (and) it felt like I was making a big difference in their life.”* *“I loved working with students with special needs when I substituted, so I decided I wanted to become a special education teacher.”* *“I just fell in love with these peers. I personally feel they changed who I was as a person.”*

The last research question was to identify any recommendations for university teacher preparation programs to effectively recruit more special educators. The most frequently stated that recommendation made by 48% of the participants ( $n = 10$ ), was to provide more exposure and experiences with individuals with disabilities. According to one participant, *“Give more insight and opportunity to learn about special needs programs and open their eyes to see it's not scary to work with people who have special needs.”* Another stated, *“More awareness and experience working with individuals with disabilities. It was something I would have never considered until I actually had the experience of being around individuals with disabilities.”* In addition, 29% of the participants ( $n = 6$ )

recommended that university teacher preparation programs should promote the positive aspects of a career in special education. For example, one participant shared *“It may be beneficial to focus on and highlight some of the more exciting and innovative things going on within the field. There are a lot of factors that make it a rewarding profession to enter, but they are not always emphasized or accurately represented.”* Another stated, *“I think if more prospective teachers were aware of student loan forgiveness and the great need in this area more people might consider going into special education.”*

## 4 Discussion

This study explored factors influencing an individual's decision to pursue a career in special education. Given the critical shortage of qualified special education teachers, the need to examine ways to recruit more individuals into the profession is worthy of investigation. Although the survey method of this study, using an invalidated instrument with a small, non-randomized sample prevents generalizations across the general population, the information in this study contributes a preliminary understanding not only about why individuals choose special education but also the impact of experiences with individuals with disabilities as an influential factor in making that decision. This finding is consistent with other researchers who have also concluded that experiences with individuals with disabilities as a predictor in choosing special education as a career<sup>[2,18]</sup>.

The information obtained in this study repeatedly identified prior experiences as a contributing factor for choosing to teach students with disabilities. Given the strong impact of prior experience, the need to promote and provide opportunities for meaningful interactions among individuals with disabilities seems important to recruiting more individuals interested in a career in special education. For example, teacher preparation programs may benefit from providing all of their teacher candidates, regardless of certification area, and field experiences with a wide variety of students with

disabilities to provide exposure to the field of special education. At the least, additional research should be conducted to learn more about those experiences and why they make such an impact on some individuals.

Another interesting finding was that the majority of graduate students (67%) were enrolled in the alternative special education program. This result seemed to correspond with the finding that approximately 48% of the participants ( $n = 14$ ) did not indicate an interest in pursuing special education until after college. In contrast, only 19% of the graduate students ( $n = 4$ ) who already had certification in collaborative education were returning to earn their master's degree. It is unclear whether this may be a trend occurring in other regions of the country or simply unique to the participants in this study. Further, investigation including more participants from different geographic areas would be helpful to make this determination and to identify other variables to effectively recruit more individuals to pursue a career in special education.

## 5 Conclusion

The results of this study show the strong impact that prior experience with individuals with disabilities has in influencing one's decision to become a special education teacher. In addition, this study highlights the need to continue promoting disability awareness, integration, and the positive aspects of special education as a career choice.

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## APPENDIX A

### Survey Questions

1. What master's degree program are you enrolled in? (Traditional or Alternative)
2. What area is your bachelor's degree in?
3. Do you currently have a teaching certificate? (Yes or No)
  - a. If yes, in what area(s)?
4. Are you currently employed as a teacher? (Yes or No)
5. When did you first become interested in pursuing a career in special education? (Before high school, high school, college, and post-bachelor's degree).
6. Why you are pursuing a master's degree in special education?
7. How did you first become interested in a career in special education?
8. Did you have prior experience related to individuals with disabilities before deciding to pursue a career in special education? If yes, please explain.
  - a. Did your prior experience influence your decision to pursue a career in special education? If yes, explain how.
9. What do you recommend university teacher preparation programs can do to effectively recruit potential special education teaching candidates?