

Selecting Special Education as a Career: A Qualitative Study of Motivating Factors for Special Education Teachers

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Abstract : Teacher shortage in special education is an American educational problem. Due to the implementation of The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), there has been an increase in the number of students requiring special education services. Consequently, there has been an influx to hire more special education teachers. However, the historic challenge of hiring certified special education teachers has been intensified with this the profession's increasing demand of positions to fill. Efforts to improve recruitment and entry into the field must be informed by an understanding of the factors that initially inspire special education teachers to choose this career pathway. Hence, an understanding of reasons why teachers select special education as a profession is needed. The purpose of this study was to explore personal, academic, and professional motivations that lead to the selection of special education as a career choice. Using the grounded theory approach, this research investigation examined the factors that were most instrumental in influencing applicants to select special education as a career choice. Over one hundred de-identified graduate school applications to Bay Path University's Graduate Special Education Programs from 2014- 2017 were qualitatively analyzed. Grounded coding was used to discover themes that emerged in applicants' admissions essays explaining why he/she was pursuing a career in special education. The central themes that were most influential in applicants' selection of special education as a career trajectory were (a) personal/familial connections to disability, (b) meaningful paraprofessional experiences working with disabled children, (c) aptitudes for teaching, and (d) finding personal rewards and professional fulfillment by advocating for vulnerable children. Implications from these findings include educating family members of children with disabilities about possible career tracks in special education, designing programs for paraprofessionals to become certified teachers, exposing prospective teacher candidates to the field of special education, and recruiting professionals from the human services field who seek to improve the quality of life and educational opportunities for children with special needs.

Keywords : career choice, professional pathways to teaching children with disabilities, special education, teacher recruitment

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