



Teacher and Supervisor Perceptions of Alternative and Traditional Special Education Licensing Pathways in Utah, 2024-25 School Year

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Executive Summary

This study examined the quality of two special education teacher preparation pathways in Utah: the Alternate Pathway to Professional Educator License – Special Education (APPEL-SpEd) and traditional university programs. Surveys of 68 newly licensed teachers (20 from APPEL-SpEd, 48 from traditional programs) and their supervisors found virtually no differences between pathways in terms of preparation quality, mentoring experiences, or supervisor assessments of teaching effectiveness. The single significant difference was that APPEL-SpEd teachers reported significantly stronger agreement that “being a teacher is an important part of my identity.” These findings align with previous research showing minimal differences between alternative and traditional teacher preparation routes.

1 | Introduction

Alternative routes to licensure (ARLs) are pathways into teaching for individuals who are not degree-seeking students enrolled in an educator preparation program through a university. ARLs have been used for decades to remediate the persistent shortages of teachers in areas such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and special education (Myers et al., 2020). While traditional university-based programs used to be the primary supplier of educators, a steady demand for licensed educators has led to a growth in ARL pathways. One way that ARL programs address shortages is by drawing from populations that have historically been underrepresented in traditional pathways, thus adding diversity to the teaching profession (Connelly et al., 2014). Although some educators express concern that alternative routes may not prepare educators adequately (Diamond et al., 2022), research using standardized student test scores tends to find very small and inconsistent differences in student outcomes between teachers from alternative and traditional university degree routes (Kane et al., 2007; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005; von Hippel et al., 2016). The present study is the first phase of a series of studies planned to investigate the quality of ARL programs for special education in Utah. In this study, we used surveys of teachers from both traditional and ARL programs, as well as surveys of their supervisors, to examine whether perceptions of the quality of these programs differed by preparation pathway. Future studies in the series will compare programs on student outcomes and teacher retention.

In Utah, the ARL for special education is called the Alternate Pathway to Professional Educator License – Special Education (APPEL-SpEd). It is designed to meet the requirements for a Utah Professional Educator License with an area of concentration in Special Education or Preschool Special Education.¹ Individuals pursuing licensure through APPEL-SpEd first complete the requirements for the SpEd Associate Educator License (AEL), which is valid for three teaching years, during which time they can be a Special Education teacher of record and by the end of which they must complete all requirements to receive a Professional educator license in Special Education.² To begin the SpEd AEL program, participants must have a bachelor's degree, complete a criminal background review and an Educator Ethics Review, and obtain either a Special Education teaching assignment or a paraprofessional position working in a Special Education setting. Individuals in the SpEd AEL program have several options for demonstrating competency including passing Praxis tests specific to their concentration (preschool, mild/moderate, severe). In addition, they must complete a Professional Licensing Plan (PLP) developed by the USBE APPEL-SpEd team, which includes online AEL learning modules and coursework (offered by both USBE and partner universities), clinical experiences and mentoring through their Local Education Agency (LEA), and a cumulative pedagogical performance assessment (PPA). Upon completion of the APPEL-SpEd program, the teacher is recommended for a Professional Educator License in Special Education. APPEL-SpEd is “a good option for individuals who already have a Professional Educator License in another license area and only need a few courses to complete the Special Education license area of concentration requirements, however, it is available to anyone who meets the program’s criteria.”³

¹ “Alternate Pathway to Professional Educator License (APPEL)”, retrieved from <https://www.schools.utah.gov/licensing/appel> on 3/10/2023.

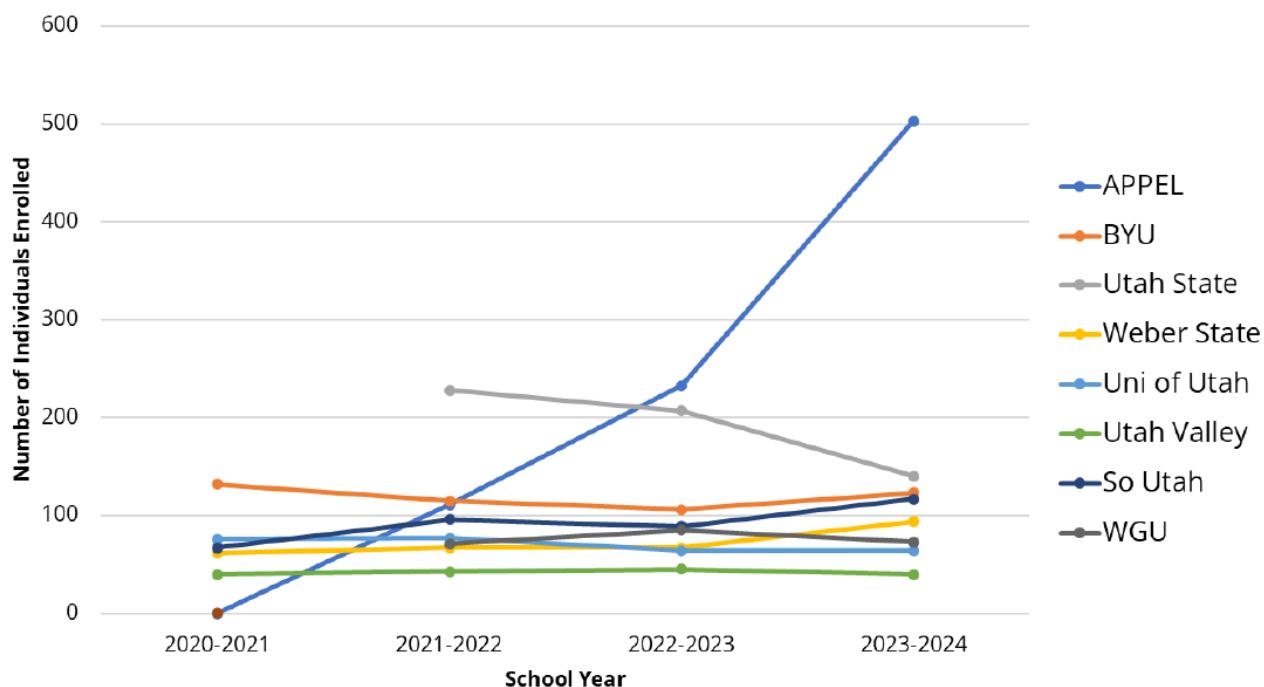
² “USBE APPEL-SpEd Program”, retrieved from <https://usbe.instructure.com/courses/1301/> on 3/10/2023.

³ “LEA Guidebook for APPEL-SpEd”, retrieved from <https://usbe.instructure.com/courses/1301/files/223124> on 3/10/2023.

APPEL-SpEd Enrollments

Enrollment in APPEL-SpEd has grown rapidly since it was introduced in the 2021-22 school year, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Enrollment in Utah Preparation Programs for Special Education
Special Education, Preschool Special Education, and Deaf Education Preparation Program Enrollment from 2020 – 2024



Note: from Figure 3 (page 9) of the 2024 Utah Education Preparation Program (EPP) Annual Report (McLachlan, 2024). Used with permission.

By 2023-24, APPEL-SpEd had grown to become the single largest special education professional educator license preparation pathway in Utah, enrolling 44% of all students pursuing a professional educator license in special education.

Retention

A central concern about graduates from ARL programs is that they might show lower levels of retention than graduates from the traditional route. As it is throughout the country, retention is a priority for Utah education leaders because of its negative impact on student learning outcomes and because of the labor and financial costs of recruiting and training new teachers (Auletto, Rorrer, & Ni, 2022; Makkonen & Thronsen, 2024). The 2024 Utah Education Preparation Program Annual Report describes the percentage of preparation program completers who were working in a Utah school district or charter school after one, two, and three years post-licensure. Unfortunately, that report does not disaggregate APPEL-SpEd from other non-SpEd APPEL programs. Table 1 aggregates across students in the university programs to provide a general comparison of the retention rate for teachers from the APPEL and

Traditional pathways. Because Western Governors University has a large online student population that may not be expected to work in Utah, that university is omitted in the calculations for Table 1.

Table 1. Retention Rate for All Newly Licensed Teachers in 2021-22

	<i>Completers in 2021-22</i>	<i>Percent Working in 2022-23</i>	<i>Percent Working in 2023-24</i>	<i>Percent Working in 2024-25</i>
<i>All APPEL Programs</i>	118	93%	86%	81%
<i>All Traditional Programs</i>	1,536	68%	62%	56%

Note: Based on Table 10 on page 15 of the 2024 Utah Education Preparation Program (EPP) Annual Report (McLachlan, 2024).

The first column in Table 1 (“Completers in 2021-22”) shows the number of teachers who completed a Utah teacher preparation program and received a Utah professional teaching license in 2021-22. The second, third, and fourth columns compute the retention rate by counting the number of the teachers from the first column who are employed in a given year and dividing by the number in the first column. Table 1 shows that teachers coming from the APPEL pathway have retention rates that are *between 24 and 25 percentage points higher than* that of teachers coming from the traditional university pathway. As mentioned above, the percentages for APPEL programs combine graduates from APPEL-SpEd and non-special-education licensure areas. It is unclear how the patterns in Table 1 might be different for APPEL-SpEd teachers specifically. Previous research on teacher retention in Utah (Auletto, Rorrer, & Ni, 2020) found that special education teachers were slightly less likely than non-special-education teachers to remain in the same school (81%, compared to 84% for non-special education teachers) and were more likely to change schools (11%, compared to 6% for non-special education teachers).⁴

Research Questions

This study is part of a multi-year series of studies to compare teachers who obtained licensure through APPEL-SpEd to teachers who obtained special education licensure through a traditional degree program on several outcomes:

- 1) Perceptions of preparation program
- 2) Supervisor assessment of teacher effectiveness
- 3) Teacher retention
- 4) Student outcomes

Each of these four research questions is explored in more detail in *Section 2: Study Design*.

Timeline

In the original statement of work for this project (drafted in August 2023), we proposed the multi-year timeline described in Table 2.

⁴ That report examined retention from 2018-19 to 2019-20.

Table 2. Timeline from Original Statement of Work (August 2023)

Cohort	Dates of Data Collection					
	3/24	1/25	3/25	1/26	3/26	1/27
2023 Cohort	1-year-out: Satisfaction, Supervisor eval	Student outcomes during year 1, 1-yr Retention Identify 2024 Cohort	2-years-out: Satisfaction, Supervisor eval	Student outcomes 1-year-out, 2-yr Retention Identify 2025 Cohort	3-years-out: Satisfaction, Supervisor eval	Student outcomes 2-years-out
2024 Cohort			1-year-out: Satisfaction, Supervisor eval	Student outcomes during year 1, 1-yr Retention Identify 2025 Cohort	2-years-out: Satisfaction, Supervisor eval	Student outcomes 1-year-out, 2-yr Retention
2025 Cohort					1-year-out: Satisfaction, Supervisor eval	Student outcomes during year 1, 1-yr Retention
Reports ⁵	August 2024	April 2025	August 2025	April 2026	August 2026	April 2027

This timeline was revised when it was discovered that too few teachers would be in the 2023 APPEL-SpEd cohort. Instead of studying such a small and potentially unrepresentative cohort, the UEPC instead spent 2023-2024 conducting pilot studies designed to improve the surveys that would be distributed to teachers and supervisors. A sample of teachers and principals received drafts of the survey form and were asked for their feedback. Based on their suggestions and additional meetings with USBE special education staff members, the surveys were improved and finalized.

Table 3 presents a revised version of the original timeline table that aligns with the original end date of this agreement (April 2027).

⁵ The “Reports” row of the table indicates when the report for the data collected *in the column above* would be available.

Table 3. Revised Timeline

Cohort	Dates of Data Collection				
	5/24	5/25	1/26	5/26	1/27
2024 Cohort	Test and refine teacher and supervisor surveys	1-year-out: Satisfaction, Supervisor assessments	Student outcomes during year 1, 1-yr Retention	2-years-out: Satisfaction, Supervisor assessments	Student outcomes 1-year-out, 2-yr Retention
2025 Cohort			Identify 2025 Cohort	1-year-out: Satisfaction, Supervisor assessments	Student outcomes during year 1, 1-yr Retention
Reports		August 2025	April 2026	August 2026	April 2027

This report discusses the first one-year-out measurement of teacher perceptions of their program and supervisor assessments of those teachers. Future reports will examine student outcomes and teacher retention.

2 | Study Design

Research Question #1: Teacher Perceptions

Survey responses from special education teachers who recently completed their professional license to teach in special education were used to compare teachers from the APPEL-SpEd pathway to teachers from the traditional university degree pathway. The survey items were developed in consultation with USBE Special Education staff members and were refined after receiving feedback from a sample of special education teachers who viewed an earlier version of the survey.

The first concept targeted by the items, and the focus of the survey, measures teachers' perceptions of the degree to which their licensing preparation program prepared them for a special education role. Rather than soliciting a general impression, the items target specific behaviors that USBE special education staff and a sample of special education teachers felt were critical for effective special education instruction (see Table 4 for the text of the items).

The second concept targets teachers' impressions of the mentorship experiences in their licensing preparation program. Mentorship emerged as an area of primary importance in Myers et al.'s (2020) review of ARL policies across states, where the authors list four requirements for ARL programs to align with IDEA Assurance 14:⁶ 1) a bachelor's degree, 2) high-quality professional development, 3) *intensive mentoring and supervision*, and 4) a time limit of three years of teaching before certification is completed. The authors single out requirement 3 (intensive mentoring and supervision) as being both important and ambiguous enough in its wording to create the potential for ARL participants to be underprepared if it is not implemented rigorously. In particular, they recommend carefully monitoring ARL programs to ensure that intensive mentorship is occurring.

The third concept measured by the survey is "teacher identity" and is measured by a single item. The teacher identity item was designed in part to address the concern that ARL graduates may not think of themselves as teachers to the same extent as graduates from traditional pathways, and in part as an indirect measure of commitment to teaching (under the assumption that a person who identifies as a teacher is more likely to persist in that role).

The fourth concept targeted job commitment, which addresses the priority assigned to retaining new teachers that was mentioned in *Section 1*. In future years, we will test the construct validity of the job commitment items by measuring the degree to which they are predictive of retention. The teacher survey items are presented in Table 4.

⁶ Assurance 14 refers to Section 612(a)(14) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which describes assurances that states must provide to receive federal special education funding. Assurance 14 specifically addresses the necessary qualifications of participants in alternative routes to licensure.

Table 4. Items on the Survey Completed by Newly Licensed Special Education Teachers

Concept	Items
<i>Quality of Preparation</i>	My special education licensing preparation program prepared me to... (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) 1. ...teach content that is personalized to individual students' needs 2. ...design supplemental instruction/interventions that are tailored to individual students' needs. 3. ...comply with IDEA regulations regarding IEPs (e.g., preparing, implementing, monitoring progress, revising). 4. ...keep up with record-keeping/paperwork. 5. ...maintain relationships with students' parents. 6. ...work with school administrators to meet my own needs and the needs of my students.
<i>Mentorship Experiences</i>	In my special education licensing program, I had an instructor who... (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) 1. ...provided guidance and support. 2. ...made me comfortable seeking advice. 3. ...valued and respected me. 4. ...encouraged me to pursue my goals. 5. ...cared about my success.
<i>Teacher Identity</i>	Being a teacher is an important part of my identity. (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)
<i>Job Commitment</i>	1. In the past 3 months, have you actively searched for new job opportunities outside of your school? (Y/N) 2. In the past 3 months, have you actively searched for new job opportunities outside of the field of education? (Y/N) 3. I see myself still working in special education in two years. (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)
<i>Comments</i>	Any additional comments or suggestions? (open-ended response)

Research Question #2: Supervisor Assessment

For each person in the sample of newly licensed special education teachers for RQ1, we identified their supervisor based on information about the school or schools where they were teaching. When a school had a staff member designated as coordinating special education services, this person was identified as the supervisor. Otherwise, the principal was identified as the supervisor. The principal/supervisor was contacted by email and invited to complete a survey about the teacher. Supervisors were first asked if they knew this person well enough to comment on their teaching, and when the answer was no, they were thanked for their participation and the survey ended. Otherwise, they were presented with a series of statements that identified the teacher by name and addressed different areas of performance, asking the supervisor to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement (with the additional option of indicating that they “don’t know”). The statements were developed in consultation with USBE Special Education staff members and were refined after receiving feedback from a sample of principals who viewed an earlier version of the survey. The final items are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Survey Items Completed by Supervisors of Newly Licensed Special Education Teachers

1. [Teacher's name] has strong lesson delivery skills.
2. [Teacher's name] is effective in classroom management.
3. [Teacher's name] collaborates with teacher colleagues to support student learning.
4. [Teacher's name] collaborates with staff (e.g., paraprofessionals and related services providers) to support student learning.
5. In the classroom, [Teacher's name] goes beyond basic caretaking tasks and actively contributes to student learning.
6. When a student exhibits challenging behavior, [Teacher's name] attempts to understand why.
7. [Teacher's name] tailors support to meet each student's unique needs and strengths.
8. [Teacher's name] makes all students feel valued and welcomed.
9. [Teacher's name] complies with IDEA regulations and Utah State Board of Education rules regarding IEPs (e.g., preparing, implementing, monitoring progress, revising).
10. [Teacher's name] collaborates effectively with the parent/family on student Individualized Learning Plans.
11. Anything else that would be helpful in assessing the quality of his or her preparation for working in special education? (open-ended)

Answers to these items for teachers in the APPEL-SpEd and traditional pathways were compared to test whether teachers who proceed through the different pathways are perceived differently by their supervisors.

Research Question #3: Educator Retention

For Research Question #3 (retention), CORE code assignment information for each teacher will be gathered in the target year (starting in the second year after licensure) as well as the year prior. For each school year, each member of the cohort will be classified as either a teacher of Special Education, a teacher in a non Special Education role, a USBE educator working in some other capacity (e.g., administrative), or Other (not present in the USBE educator database). Retention will be calculated in several respects: as the percentage of newly licensed teachers who have at least partial Special Education teaching roles, any teaching roles, any educator role, or no educator role in the subsequent year. According to the revised timeline (see Table 3), the results for this research question will be available for the first time in the April 2026 report.

Research Question #4: Student Outcomes

For Research Question #4 (student outcomes), student achievement test scores (e.g., RISE and Utah Aspire Plus Language, Math, and Science scores) and high school completion status will be collected for each student whose course enrollment records match a teacher identified in the cohorts. Achievement test scores will be collected for both the current year and the year previous so that previous year's scores can be used as a statistical covariate along with other student characteristics: disability label (e.g., autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, etc.), race/ethnicity, English learner status, and eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. Outcomes for students will be regressed on a model that includes both student-level covariates (listed above) and school-level covariates (e.g., percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch), with the central predictor of interest being the teacher's license pathway. This process will provide an estimate for the effect of license pathway on outcomes after controlling for the effects of these extraneous variables. According to the revised timeline

(see Table 3), the results for this research question will be available for the first time in the April 2026 report.

3 | Characteristics of Newly Licensed and Employed Special Education Teachers

The USBE provided the UEPC with the names, CACTUS ID numbers, and email addresses of 146 teachers who received a professional license in special education or preschool special education between May 3, 2023 and December 26, 2024 and also had a special education teaching assignment in Utah public schools in the 2024-2025 school year. These conditions were designed to sample teachers who could be considered “recent graduates” of these license pathways and who also had work experience in special education following the completion of their licensure. These teachers would be in a good position to reflect on their preparation by considering it in the context of their recently completed teaching experiences. Thirty-four of these teachers received their license through the APPEL pathway and 112 through the Traditional pathway. APPEL-SpEd had more teachers receiving licenses in 2024 ($n = 28$) than in 2023 ($n = 6$). The counts for the Traditional pathway were similar in 2024 and 2023 ($ns = 60$ and 52 , respectively).⁷

Using teaching assignment, degree, and licensing information available to the UEPC through a Master Data Sharing Agreement (MDSA) with USBE, the UEPC compared the teachers who received their special education licenses through the APPEL pathway to the teachers who received their license through the Traditional pathway and identified the following differences:⁸

1. **APPEL-SpEd teachers had more years of teaching experience** ($M = 5.0$) than special education teachers from Traditional pathways ($M = 2.7$).⁹ Note that no teachers in the sample could have years of experience less than one because all teachers in the sample were at least teaching in the 2024-25 school year.
2. **APPEL-SpEd teachers had more years of teaching assignments classified as special education** ($M = 4.2$) than special education teachers from Traditional pathways ($M = 2.3$).¹⁰ Note that no teachers in the sample could have years of experience less than one because all teachers in the sample were at least teaching in special education roles in the 2024-25 school year.

⁷ For the purpose of counting teachers by the school year when they received their license, teachers who received their license after June were considered to be in the next school year. For example, if a teacher received their degree in July 2023, they would be placed in the 2024 school year, whereas a teacher who received their degree in June 2023 would be placed in the 2023 school year.

⁸ The Utah Education Policy Center has a Master Data Sharing Agreement with the Utah State Board of Education for use of education data for evaluation and research purposes. The UEPC adheres to the terms of the Master Data Sharing Agreement, including terms of use, confidentiality, non-disclosure, data security, monitoring, and applicable state and federal laws and regulations. The UEPC also adheres to University of Utah Institutional Review Board provisions and FERPA regulations to protect student privacy and does not report any personally identifiable information.

⁹ Number of years of teaching experienced is measured by the number of distinct school years when a teacher had a teaching assignment in a public school in the state of Utah.

¹⁰ Number of years of special education teaching experienced is measured by the number of distinct school years when a teacher had a teaching assignment with a core code that included the digits “23” in either the first and second positions or the seventh and eighth positions.

3. **APPEL-SpEd teachers were more likely to have a Master's degree** (50%) than special education teachers from Traditional pathways (36%).
4. **APPEL-SpEd teachers were more likely to have a teaching license in another area outside of special education** (generally elementary or secondary education) that they received prior to receiving their most recent professional teaching license in special education (26%) compared to special education teachers from Traditional pathways (6%).¹¹ The rate of prior teaching license among APPEL-SpEd teachers (26%) is lower than expected given the description of this pathway as a good choice for teachers “who already have a Professional Educator License in another license area” (see Footnote 3). Rather than the rule, it appears that having a Professional Educator License in another area is the exception.
5. Because it is a part of the APPEL-SpEd pathway, **100% of APPEL-SpEd teachers received an Associate's license in special education prior to receiving their Professional license, compared to only 33% of special education teachers from the Traditional pathway.**

Given these differences between newly licensed teachers from the APPEL-SpEd and traditional pathways, it will be important to statistically control for those variables when comparing the teachers in those pathways. Otherwise, it would be impossible to distinguish between the effects of pathway and the effects of these other variables: teaching experience, teaching experience in special education, having an advanced degree, and having an earlier professional teaching license in an area outside of special education. The presence or absence of an associate's license was not included as a covariate because it was a constant within the APPEL-SpEd group.

¹¹ However, special education teachers from Traditional pathways were more likely than APPEL-SpEd teachers to receive a license in an area outside of special education in the *same* year that they received their most recent special education license (16% vs. 3%).

4 | Findings from Teacher Survey

Overview

The teacher survey was designed to provide insight into the experiences and perceptions of individuals pursuing special education licensure through the APPEL and Traditional pathways. The survey gathered information on teacher perceptions of the quality of preparation, mentorship experiences, professional identity, and indicators of satisfaction and retention. In addition, teacher background characteristics were obtained from administrative records, allowing us to describe and control for differences between groups.

Method

Participants

Details about the sampling frame for the teacher survey are provided in Section 3: “Characteristics of Newly Licensed and Employed Special Education Teachers.” Using the Qualtrics online survey platform, the UEPC emailed all 146 newly licensed and currently-employed special education teachers and invited them to complete a survey. Twenty of the 34 APPEL-SpEd teachers in the sampling frame answered at least 50% of the survey, for a **response rate of 59%**. Of the 112 special education teachers from the Traditional pathway who were in the sampling frame, 48 completed at least 50% of the survey, for a **response rate of 43%**.

To investigate whether the teachers who responded to the survey were significantly different from the teachers who did not respond (thus making the sample unrepresentative), we fit a statistical model estimating the probability of responding to the survey from pathway, the most recent year in which teachers received their professional special education teaching license, the number of years they taught in Utah public schools, the number of years they taught special education in Utah public schools, whether they had a Master’s degree, and whether they had received a professional teaching license in an area other than special education prior to receiving their most recent special education professional teaching license. None of those predictors were significantly related to the probability of completing the survey (all $ps > 0.1$).¹² These results indicate that the teachers who responded to the survey were not significantly different from the teachers who did not respond.

Survey

Survey items focused on (a) teachers’ perceptions of the quality of preparation provided by their Special Education licensing program, (b) teachers’ perceptions of the level of mentorship from instructors in the program, (c) teachers’ sense of professional identity as an educator, and (d) indicators of retention and satisfaction. Details of these items are presented in Table 4. Most items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”), with higher values reflecting more positive perceptions or higher retention/satisfaction. Two items asked whether teachers were actively seeking new job opportunities, to which respondents answered “yes” or “no.” Teacher background characteristics – including total years of teaching, years teaching in special education, attainment of a

¹² This logistic regression model did not perform well in predicting participation on the survey (McFadden’s pseudo $R^2 = 0.06$), supporting the conclusion that respondents were not systematically different from non-respondents on these four variables.

master's degree, and whether a professional teaching license in an area outside of special education had been obtained prior to receiving the most recent special education teaching license – were obtained using a MDSA between the UEPC and the Utah State Board of Education.¹³

Analysis Plan

Analysis proceeded in two stages. First, we examined and compared teacher background characteristics across pathways to understand baseline differences between the teachers in these two pathways. Next, we calculated descriptive statistics (e.g., means) for each set of survey items and used regression analysis to determine whether survey responses differed by respondents' chosen pathway (APPEL vs. Traditional). These analyses controlled for differences in teaching experience and educational background identified in the administrative data. This approach allowed us to more accurately assess whether differences in teacher perceptions could be attributed to pathway rather than to other teacher characteristics.

Findings

Teacher Characteristics by Pathway

As shown in Table 6, on average, survey respondents from the APPEL-SpEd pathway had more total teaching experience ($M = 5.15$ years) compared with those in the Traditional pathway ($M = 3.08$ years). APPEL teachers also reported more years specifically teaching in special education ($M = 3.85$ vs. 2.54 years). A slightly higher proportion of APPEL teachers held a master's degree (50%) compared with Traditional pathway teachers (44%), and a higher percentage of APPEL teachers (30% vs. 12.5%) received a professional teaching license in an area outside of special education prior to receiving their most recent professional teaching license in special education.

Table 6. Characteristics of Teacher Survey Respondents by Pathway

Pathway	Years Teaching	Years Teaching Special Education	Master's Degree	Professional Teaching License not in Special Education Prior to Most Recent Special Education License
APPEL	5.15	3.85	50%	30%
Traditional	3.08	2.54	43%	12.5%

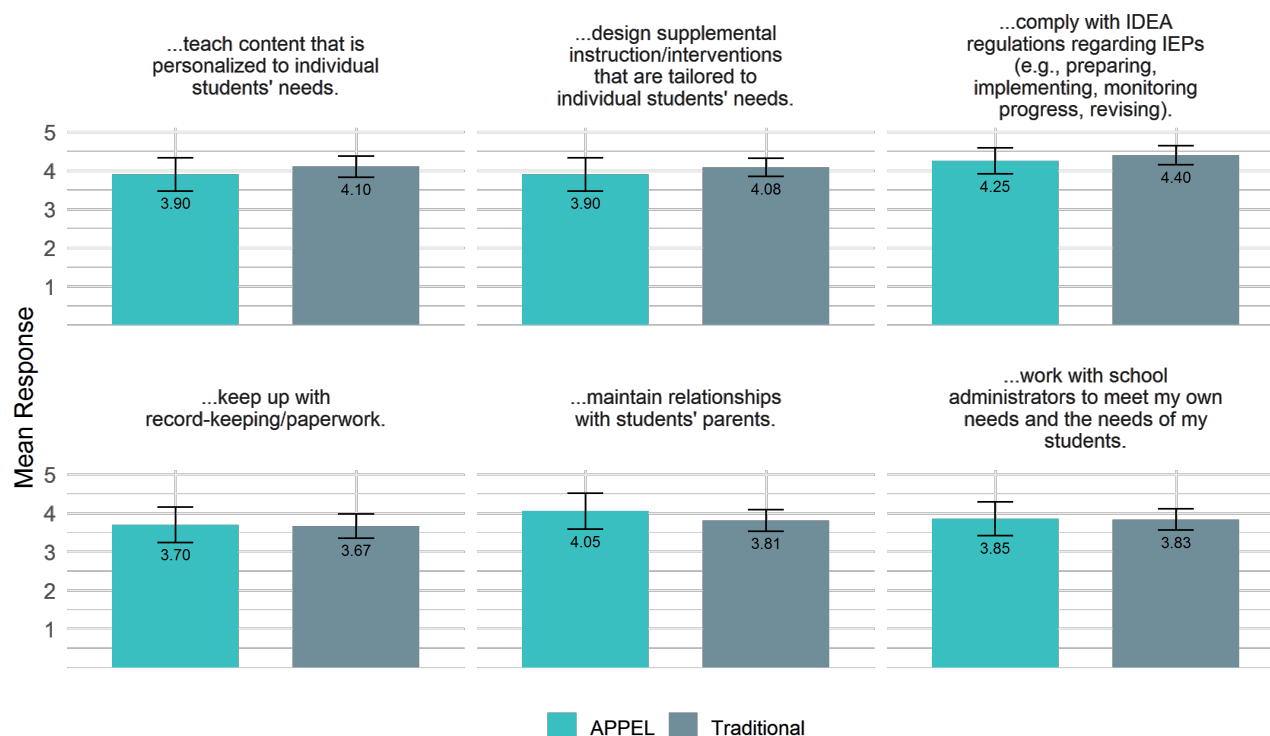
The differences between pathways in Table 6 are similar to the differences observed for the total population of newly licensed special education teachers discussed in Section 3 and suggest that APPEL teachers tend to have more experience and educational qualifications relative to their peers in the Traditional pathway. Because of these baseline differences, subsequent analyses that compared the responses of teachers pursuing APPEL and Traditional pathways controlled for teaching experience, educational background, and licensing history.

Teacher Perceptions of the Quality of Preparation by Pathway

Figure 2 presents mean responses and 95% confidence intervals for the six items assessing teacher perceptions of the quality of their preparation, broken down by pathway.

¹³ See footnote 8 for details on the MDSA.

Figure 2. Teacher Perceptions of the Quality of Preparation by Pathway



Note. $N = 20$ APPEL-SpEd graduates and 48 graduates from the traditional pathway. Each item had the stem “My special education licensing preparation program prepared me to...” Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the mean. When the means of both groups fall outside the confidence interval of the other group, this suggests a statistically significant difference at $p < .05$.

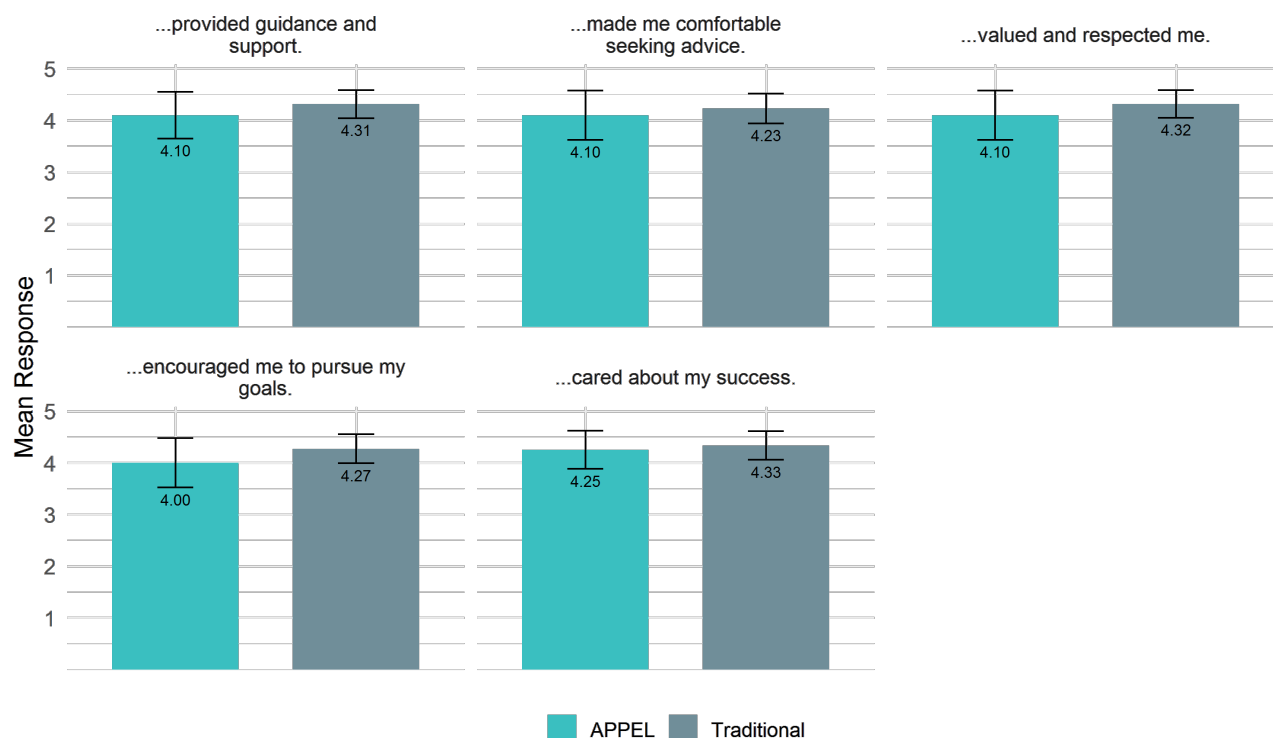
Mean responses were consistently above the midpoint of the scale (3.0) for both pathways, indicating generally positive attitudes toward the quality of preparation. The highest ratings of preparation for both pathways concerned compliance with IDEA regulations regarding IEPs ($M_s = 4.25$ and 4.40), whereas the lowest ratings of preparation for both pathways concerned keeping up with record-keeping and paperwork ($M_s = 3.70$ and 3.67).¹⁴ Regression analyses that controlled for teaching characteristics revealed **no significant differences** between teachers from the two pathways (all $p_s > .05$). Overall, teachers in both pathways reported generally positive perceptions of their preparation, suggesting comparable preparation quality across pathways.

Teacher Perceptions of the Level of Mentorship by Pathway

Figure 3 presents mean responses and 95% confidence intervals for the five items assessing teacher perceptions of the level of mentorship provided by their instructors, broken down by pathway.

¹⁴ IDEA stands for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a federal law providing much of the legal requirements for special education programs. IEPs are Individualized Education Programs and describe a child's current performance, annual goals, and special education and related services to be provided.

Figure 3. Teacher Perceptions of the Mentorship by Pathway



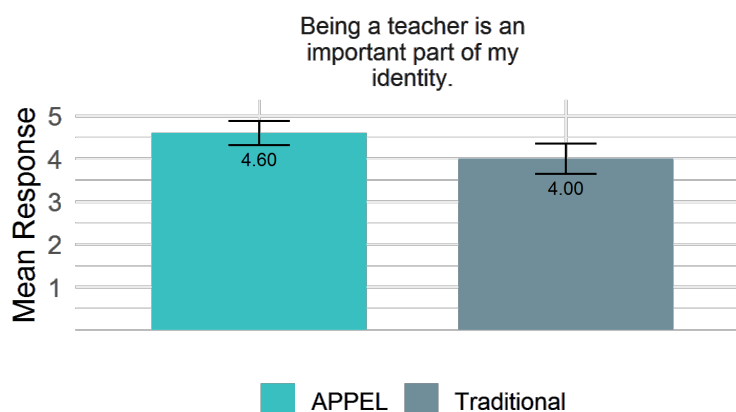
Note. $N = 20$ APPEL-SpEd graduates and 48 graduates from the traditional pathway. Each item had the stem, “In my special education licensing program, I had an instructor who...” Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the mean.

Mean responses were consistently above 4.0 for both pathways, indicating slightly more positive attitudes toward mentorship than toward preparation quality. Regression analyses that controlled for teacher background characteristics revealed **no significant differences** (all $ps > .05$) between pathways. Overall, both pathways appear to provide comparable mentorship experiences according to teacher self-reports, with both groups reporting generally positive perceptions of the level of mentorship provided by instructors. These high ratings of mentorship experiences are reassuring given policy analysis that emphasizes the importance of “intensive mentoring and supervision” to ensuring that AR programs align with IDEA Assurance 14 requirements for “highly qualified” special education teachers (Myers et al., 2020, p. 339). Although no significant differences were found in the current sample of 20 APPEL-SpEd teachers and 48 traditional pathway teachers, this should not be interpreted as conclusive that the true difference between the pathways is zero. Testing the hypothesis that the true difference is zero will require additional years of data and a much larger sample size.

Teachers’ Sense of Professional Identity as an Educator

Figure 4 presents mean responses and 95% confidence intervals for the single item assessing teachers’ sense of professional identity as an educator, broken down by pathway.

Figure 4. Teacher Perceptions of Teaching Identity by Pathway



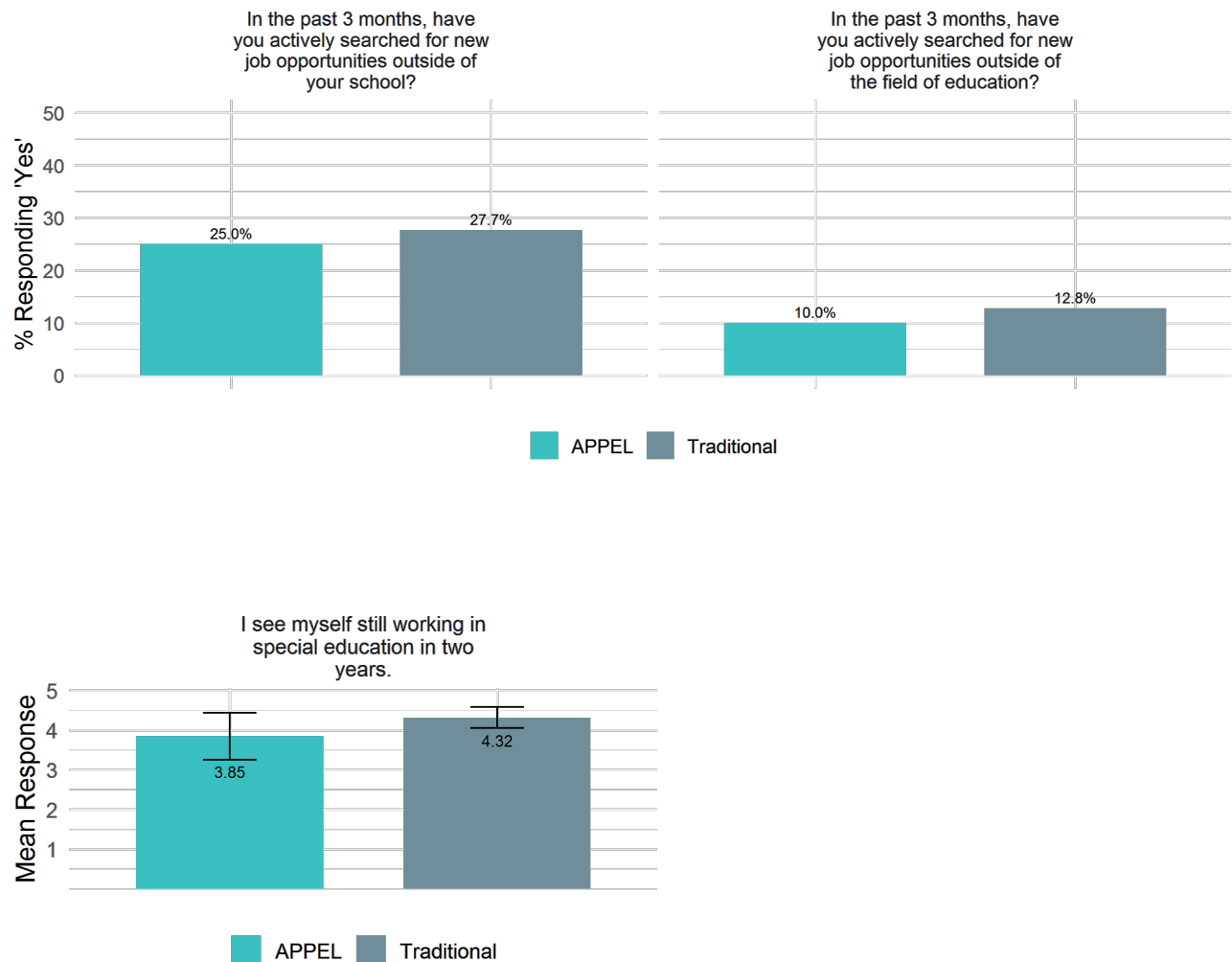
Note: $N = 20$ APPEL-SpEd graduates and 48 graduates from the traditional pathway.

Mean responses for both groups met or exceeded 4.0, indicating an average rating of “agree” or better. Regression analyses controlling for teacher characteristics indicated that teachers in the APPEL pathway reported stronger professional identity as educators compared to those in the Traditional pathway ($B = -.74, t = -2.43, p = .018$). **Even after controlling for variables related to teacher identity, such as teaching experience and prior licensure, teachers in the APPEL-SpEd pathway still reported significantly higher identification with being a teacher than teachers in the Traditional pathway.**

Indicators of Teacher Satisfaction and Retention

The top panel of Figure 5 presents the percentage of teachers who reported searching for new job opportunities outside their school (top left panel), outside of education (right panel), and their estimate of the likelihood they would still be working in special education two years from now (bottom panel). Although there were **no significant differences** by pathway for these three questions, it is noteworthy that fully one quarter of respondents indicated that they have been searching for jobs outside of their current school. This suggests an unexpectedly low level of commitment to their current teaching assignment that might be worth further study in its own right. In subsequent years, it will be worthwhile to explore whether this job searching predicted teachers changing positions or whether it is typical of teachers in a new position to search for alternatives.

Figure 5. Commitment to Current Teaching Position by Pathway



Note: $N = 20$ APPEL-SpEd graduates and 48 graduates from the traditional pathway.

Responses to the Open-Ended Item on the Teacher Survey

Five teachers from the APPEL pathway and 16 teachers from the Traditional pathway responded to the open-ended prompt, “Any additional comments or suggestions?” Although the small number of comments do not permit a systematic analysis, some observations are:

1. Two APPEL teachers reported dissatisfaction that the content they received through APPEL was **redundant with their prior learning**. Although some duplication of content may be unavoidable for a program that caters to educators who have already obtained a professional teaching license, it may be worth considering whether a competency-based assessment could be used to identify areas where APPEL candidates already have expertise and focus instruction on other areas.
2. Two APPEL teachers reported that **administrative changes in the APPEL program while they were in the program introduced confusion**. As a new pathway, APPEL-SpEd is expected to show some growing pains as the program evolves, but it will also be important to consider how to minimize the impact of changes on those already in the program.

3. One APPEL teacher reported a **decline in the respect she received** from other teachers following her transition to special education: “The classes also didn't prepare me for the way others view me now that I teach SPED and not gen ed. Colleagues that I have worked with for years now treat me as less than a paraprofessional. They don't respect me.” This comment is especially striking because the teacher had experience both in general education and special education roles and so had a more objective perspective for comparing reactions to the two roles than someone who only had a role in one area.
4. Two teachers, one in APPEL and one not in APPEL, were disappointed that teachers in APPEL were **ineligible for the Teacher Salary Supplement Program (TSSP)**.
5. Two teachers in the Traditional pathway reported that their **para-professional experience was vital** in preparing them for the special education classroom ("without that experience I would have been lost").
6. Two teachers in the Traditional pathway said that no program could fully prepare someone to be a special education teacher. Although they said that new teachers should expect to feel overwhelmed, one said that they thought the **most important aspect of their program was that it “[showed] me that I do love the field of SPED, that my heart was in it.”**

The last two observations – the importance of para-professional experience and the potential for programs to help teachers connect their careers to their personal priorities – are similar to themes identified in another recent study of special education conducted by the UEPC, which found that prior experience in special education settings (e.g., working as a paraeducator) and personal connections (e.g., having a family member with special needs) were significant predictors of preservice teachers’ interest in a special education career (Acree et al., 2025).

5 | Findings from Supervisor Survey

Overview

Although the perspective of the teachers themselves is critical for understanding how the APPEL pathway compares to the Traditional pathway for the professional teaching license in special education, the UEPC also sought the perspective of supervisors of these teachers. Supervisors observe the performance of many teachers and thus can assess individual teachers relative to their peers. In addition to having a different perspective than the teachers themselves, supervisors were asked to assess the quality of teacher *performance* rather than the quality of their preparation. Thus, information from supervisors supplements the information provided in the previous section both by offering a broader perspective across multiple teachers and by shifting the focus from perceptions of the quality of a preparation program to perceptions of teachers' ability to fulfill their responsibilities.

Method

Participants

For each of the 146 teachers in the sampling frame, the UEPC sought the name and email address of a supervisor who would be in a position to assess the teacher with regard to their lesson delivery, classroom management, collaboration with other teachers, collaboration with staff, etc. When a school had a director of special education, this person was identified as the teacher's supervisor, but in most cases the supervisor was identified as the principal at the school where a teacher was assigned. Supervisor email addresses were gathered from school webpages. Because the same supervisor was sometimes shared by more than one teacher, there were a total of 131 unique supervisors.

Using the Qualtrics online survey platform, the UEPC emailed all 131 supervisors and invited them to complete a survey. When a supervisor had more than one teacher in the sampling frame, one teacher was selected at random to minimize the survey burden on supervisors. Seven of the supervisors for the 34 APPEL-SpEd teachers in the sampling frame indicated that they knew the teacher well enough to comment on their teaching and answered at least 50% of the survey, for a **response rate of 21%**.¹⁵ Of the 112 special education teachers from the Traditional pathway who were in the sampling frame, 20 had supervisors who indicated that they knew the teacher well enough to comment on their teaching and completed at least 50% of the survey, for a **response rate of 18%**. Given the low response rates from supervisors, the results should not be considered representative of recently licensed special education teachers. Nevertheless, we report the results of the survey as an imperfect snapshot of supervisor perspectives of newly licensed educators from these two pathways.

Survey

Supervisors were presented with a series of statements that identified the teacher by name and addressed several areas of performance, asking the supervisor to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement (with the additional option of indicating that they "don't know"). For a complete list of items in the supervisor survey, see Table 5.

¹⁵ Because our focus is on the degree to which survey responses represent the original sampling frame of teachers, we report response rates as the percentage of the original sampling frame of teachers who were captured by supervisor assessments, rather than the percentage of supervisors who responded.

Findings

Table 7 reports the characteristics of the 27 teachers (7 from the APPEL pathway and 20 from the traditional pathway) who were assessed in the survey of supervisors.

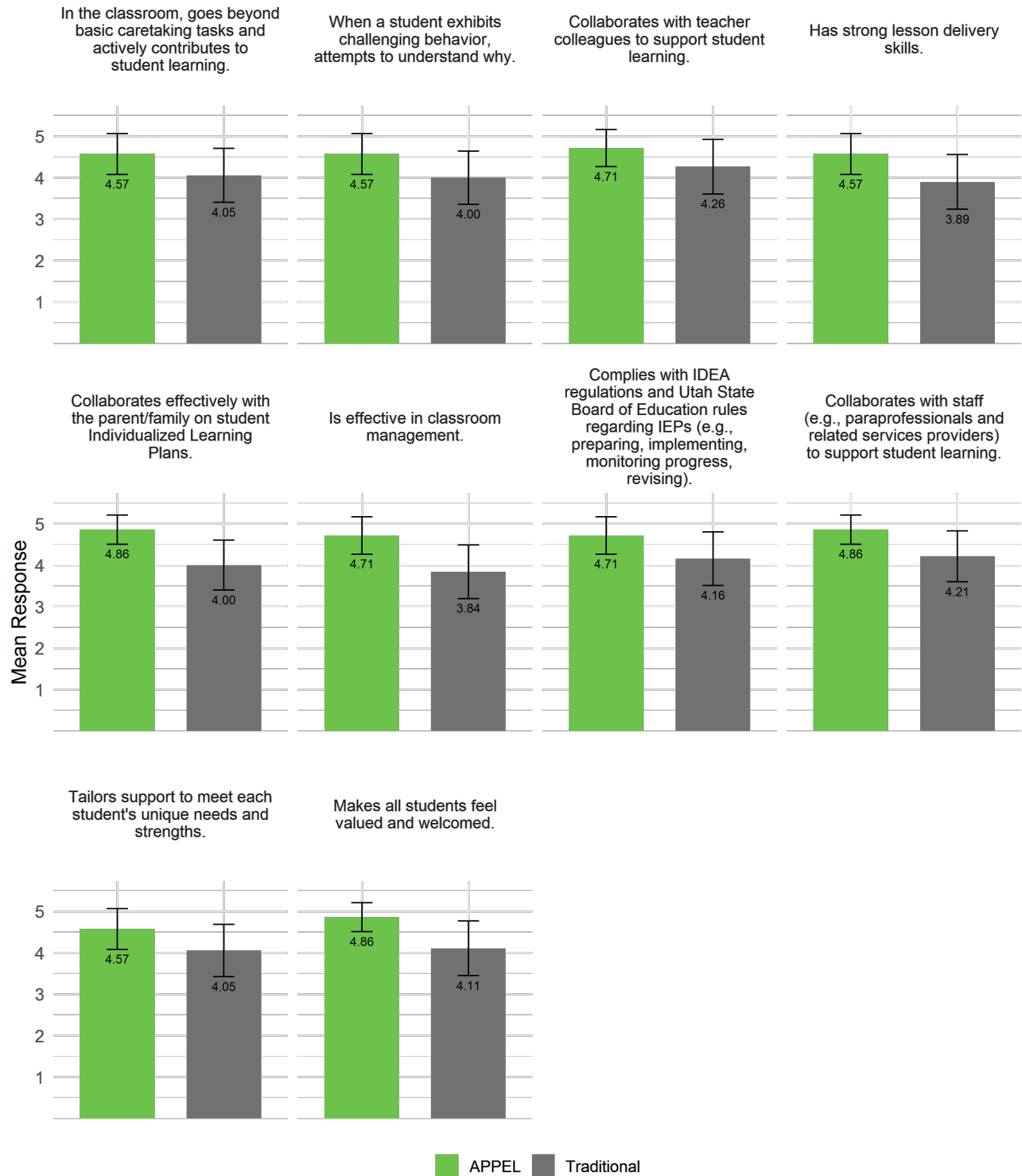
Table 7. Characteristics of Teachers Assessed in the Supervisor Survey

Pathway	Years Teaching	Years Teaching Special Education	Master’s Degree	Professional Teaching License not in Special Education Prior to Most Recent Special Education License
APPEL	6.29	3.71	43%	29%
Traditional	2.63	2.11	35%	5%

As with the teacher survey sample (see Table 6) and the population of recently licensed special education teachers (see Section 3), the teachers who were from the APPEL pathway tended to be more experienced, more likely to have an advanced degree, and more likely to have had a professional teaching license in an area other than special education prior to receiving their most recent professional license in special education.

Supervisor ratings are summarized in Figure 6, which shows the means and 95% confidence intervals of the means for ratings of teachers in the APPEL and Traditional pathways.

Figure 6. Supervisor Ratings of Teachers by Pathway



Note: $N = 7$ APPEL-SpEd graduates and 20 graduates from the traditional pathway.

Across all 10 of the outcomes rated by supervisors, ratings of teachers in the APPEL pathway tended to be slightly higher than ratings of teachers in the Traditional pathway. However, two factors suggest caution in concluding a difference: the small number of observations behind each mean (seven for the APPEL pathway and 20 for the Traditional pathway) and the pre-existing differences between teachers in each group (see Table 7). When linear regression models were used that controlled for teacher background characteristics and multiple comparisons, **none of the outcomes were significantly different by pathway**. Overall, supervisor assessments of special education teachers from the APPEL and Traditional pathways did not meaningfully differ and were generally positive (often averaging above the 4.0 threshold for “Agree” on the 5-point scale).

Responses to the Open-Ended Item on the Supervisor Survey

Five supervisors of teachers in the APPEL pathway and 11 supervisors of teachers in the Traditional pathway left responses to the open-ended prompt, “Anything else that would be helpful in assessing the quality of his or her preparation for working in special education?” In comparison to the open-ended responses from the teacher survey, the open-ended responses to the supervisor survey tended to be less specific and often expressed general approval: “She is amazing and does a great job with every student at [our] school,” “She is a good, natural teacher,” “I love having ____ as part of my team!”

Comparing the open-ended assessments of APPEL teachers to the assessments of Traditional teachers, one difference that is suggested is **that all five of the comments about APPEL teachers mention *skill or competency***: “extremely detailed and student-focused,” “true professional,” “strong skill set,” “asks the right questions...always looking to improve,” “understands individual learner differences.” In contrast, only two of the 11 comments about teachers in the Traditional pathway mention skill or competency: “creates compliant eligibilities and IEPs...excellent at collaborating with general education teachers,” “works well with students that escalate or exhibit behaviors.” The other open-ended responses about teachers from the Traditional pathway were either general or included some room for improvement: “doesn’t always choose the most philosophically sound voices to buy into,” “struggles with the IEP aspects,” “lessons aren’t as diverse with good teaching practices.” With only 16 open-ended responses, any conclusions should be regarded as tentative and speculative. However, future research could explore whether the pattern of more specific skill-related observations regarding teachers from the APPEL pathway than the Traditional pathway is confirmed in subsequent years.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research that found little or no differences in student outcomes between teachers from traditional and ARL pathways (Kane et al., 2007; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005; von Hippel et al., 2016), surveys of newly licensed special education teachers in Utah also found few differences between pathways. The 20 respondents from the APPEL-SpEd pathway and 48 respondents from a traditional pathway saw their preparation and mentoring similarly and (generally) positively. The one case where the pathways differed was for the item, “being a teacher is an important part of my identity.” Contrary to the expectations of some educators that teachers from ARL pathways do not take their teaching role as seriously as teachers from traditional pathways (Diamond et al., 2022), it was teachers from the APPEL-SpEd pathway who agreed with this more than teachers from the traditional pathway, even after controlling for the greater teaching experience and credentials of APPEL-SpEd teachers. Although there were too few responses to the open-ended item to identify any clear differences between programs, responses did reinforce the importance of para-professional experiences in preparing special education teachers, the lower level of respect felt by special education teachers, and the role that special education preparation programs can play in helping prospective educators discover their passion for the field. The role of para-professional experiences and personal connections to special education are similar to factors that the UEPC recently identified as influential in preparation students’ decisions to pursue special education (Acree, Rorrer, & Altermatt, 2025).

Responses from supervisors (principals and special education coordinators) were too few for the findings to be considered representative of newly licensed special education teachers (only 7 ratings of APPEL-SpEd teachers and 20 ratings of traditional pathway teachers), but the pattern of results was similar to the pattern from the survey of teachers. That is, no significant differences between pathways in teachers’ abilities to fulfill the key responsibilities of their roles as special education teachers. For teachers from both pathways, supervisors tended to provide positive assessments (mean responses were generally above the 4.0 threshold of “agree” on the 1-5 response scale). An intriguing pattern in open-ended responses by supervisors is that all five responses regarding APPEL-SpEd teachers praised them specifically for skill or competence; this occurred only twice in the eleven comments about teachers from traditional pathways. Given the small number of responses, this pattern should be regarded extremely tentatively but does warrant additional exploration when more data from supervisors are available.

Limitations and Future Directions

The primary limitation of the present study was the number of responses. In the survey of teachers, the response *rate* was higher than normal: 59% of APPEL-SpEd teachers responded to the survey and 43% of traditional pathway teachers responded. These figures are higher than those obtained in surveys of teachers in recent years. Furthermore, the representativeness of the sample was supported by analyses confirming that respondents were no different from non-respondents on any of the background variables: teaching experience, advanced degrees, and prior licensure. Although the response rate and sample profile were satisfactory, the raw number of responses (20 from APPEL-SpEd teachers and 48 from traditional pathway teachers) meant that any differences between groups would have to be large to be statistically significant. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge that although we did not find many significant differences between pathways, we cannot conclude that the true difference between the pathways is zero. Only with additional studies in later years and more observations would we be in a position to test the hypothesis that a difference between the pathways is zero.

For future studies, participation might be encouraged through the use of incentives such as a popular text on special education or a classroom resource. For the survey of supervisors, the small sample problem was worse: response rates of 21% for APPEL-SpEd teachers and 18% for traditional pathway teachers, corresponding to raw counts of only seven ratings of APPEL-SpEd teachers and 20 ratings of traditional pathway teachers. As with future studies of teachers, future studies of supervisors should consider incentives for participation as a strategy for increasing response rate. Another possibility for future studies is to expand the teacher background characteristics to include the population density of a school's location (e.g., urban, suburban, town, rural, remote) and the grade level of a teacher's students.

Conclusion

The present study is the first in a series designed to examine the quality of alternative routes for professional educator licensure in special education in Utah. In this report, we focused on the results of a survey not only of teachers who had recently completed their professional license through the traditional university degree pathway or the APPEL-SpEd pathway, but also of the supervisors of those teachers. Across both surveys, we found only one statistically significant difference between pathways: compared to teachers from traditional pathways, APPEL-SpEd teachers reported significantly higher levels of agreement that “being a teacher is an important part of my identity.” Although many educators are skeptical that graduates from alternative licensure pathways are sufficiently qualified (Diamond et al., 2022), our finding of few differences between the pathways is consistent with research on student outcomes that tends to find no, small, or inconsistent differences between the pathways (Kane et al., 2007; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005; von Hippel et al., 2016). In subsequent reports, we will shift our focus to comparing the pathways in terms of teacher retention and student outcomes before returning to the survey questions explored here (see Table 3).

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