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Preservice Teachers' Interest in Pursuing Special Education:

A Survey of Utah Preservice Teachers

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Executive Summary

This study about preservice teachers' interest in pursuing special education and their perceptions of the special education teaching profession is a product of the ongoing research practice partnership between the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC). Through this partnership, the UEPC has conducted a series of studies aimed at understanding the educator pipeline and factors that may impact this pipeline and special education. This report examines why preservice teachers choose careers in special vs. general education, how they perceive the special education teaching profession, and what factors influence these perceptions.

Key Findings

- **Predictors of Interest in Special Education:** Preservice teachers' interest in a special education career was most strongly associated with past work experience in special education, advice from mentors, and perceptions of teacher workload. Those drawn to special education often cited personal motivations as well – for example, a desire to make a meaningful impact, personal connections to special education, and a passion for inclusivity in education.
- **Perceptions of Workload and Role Differences:** Preservice teachers perceived general education teachers as receiving more support from their colleagues and having more opportunities to advance than special education teachers, while special education teachers were perceived as spending more time managing student behavior and doing administrative/paperwork than general education teachers. Participants' views of workload and responsibilities varied with their own intended career path: those more interested in general education believed that general education teachers spend more time working outside of school hours, whereas those favoring special education felt that special education teachers do more after-hours work.
- **Influence of Prior Experience and Program Exposure:** Past work experience (e.g., paraeducators), coursework, and preservice practicums helped shape preservice teachers' expectations and provided insights into the role and responsibilities of teaching in special education. Personal connections to special education provided added perspective and understanding of the "realities" of the profession.

Considerations

The report's findings point to several considerations for strengthening the pipeline of future special educators in Utah. Education stakeholders should focus on strategies that nurture interest in special education and better prepare all teacher candidates to understand and engage with the field:

- **Embed Early Field Experiences:** Ensure all teacher preparation pathways (general and special education alike) include structured, high-quality field experiences in

special education settings. Early and authentic exposure—through practicum placements, internships, or high-school career and technical programs—can help candidates develop a realistic understanding of the special educator role and build confidence in working with students with disabilities.

- **Integrate Special Education across Preparation Programs:** Strengthen the exposure to special education content and practices in general education teacher preparation. Many preservice respondents outside of special education programs noted sporadic or insufficient training on how to support students with disabilities.
- **Build upon Prior Experience and "Grow Your Own" Pathways:** Recruit and support individuals with special education experience (such as paraprofessionals, instructional aides, or those with personal ties to special education) into the teaching profession. The study affirms that preservice teachers who have worked in special education settings bring valuable practical knowledge, a sense of the job's realities, and strong commitment to serving students with disabilities.

Introduction

Much of the research on teacher retention, turnover, and shortages focuses on the motivation, working conditions, and satisfaction of in-service teachers. Previous research in Utah and nationally provides insights into reasons educators, once in the field, choose to remain, move, or leave, and even how the field may mitigate the loss of educators, including those in special education, from the workforce (Auletto, Rorrer & Ni, 2022a; Auletto, Rorrer & Ni, 2022b; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Ni & Rorrer, 2018). For instance, through a research-practice partnership with the Utah State Board of Education, the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) has explored the educator pipeline and factors that may impact this pipeline in both general education and special education (Ni et al., 2017a; Ni et al., 2017b; Ni & Rorrer, 2018; Rorrer et al., 2020). To date, additional UEPC studies focused on special education have identified and highlighted effective and inclusive schools in Utah (Acree et al., 2023), working conditions of special education teachers in Utah (Auletto et al., 2022b) and early career pathways of special education teachers (Auletto et al., 2022a), and surveyed the special education workforce and career trajectories of Utah special education teachers (Auletto et al., 2022c).

Although research in Utah and beyond indicates that characteristics of teacher preparation programs and the preparation experience influence later teacher retention (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Robertson & Singleton, 2010), few studies have explored the factors that led individuals to pursue careers in education, including when, how, or why individuals choose to pursue general education versus special education. This study addresses this needed line of inquiry. Specifically, this study focuses on pre-service experiences and factors that contribute to education candidates' choices.

Study Overview

The current study conducted by the UEPC addresses the following research questions.

1. Why do preservice teachers choose to become either special education or general education teachers?
2. How do preservice teachers perceive and understand the special education teaching profession?
3. How do perceptions and understanding of the special education teaching profession vary across student characteristics?

This study, which utilizes a survey developed by the UEPC and administered to preservice teachers (i.e., students enrolled in teacher preparation programs in higher education settings) across the state of Utah, explores the perceptions of the special education teaching profession from the vantage point of those currently in educator preparation programs in Utah. We investigate what motivates special education teachers to enter the profession and how they perceive and understand the profession. By better understanding preservice

teachers' motivations, perceptions (and misconceptions) of special education, we can be better informed about how to address recruitment and support opportunities for those in the educator pipeline, in particular seeking ways to enhance the pipeline of educators to special education.

Review of the Literature

There is an abundance of scholarship dedicated to informing our understanding of the factors that motivate someone to choose to teach. For instance, in a comprehensive review, Gore, Holmes, Smith, and Fray (2015) highlight the following factors as influential on the choice of teaching as a career: influence of others, teaching as a fallback career, socio-cultural influences, intrinsic factors, altruistic reasons, extrinsic reasons, and perceived teaching ability. Despite existing research aimed at maintaining a pipeline to teaching, gaps remain in understanding why someone initially chooses a teaching pathway in special education versus general education (Zhang, Wang, Losinski, Katsiyannis, 2014). Moreover, while research continues to expand on educator experiences upon entering the field, less substantive attention has been given to the role of (university-based or other) preparation programs features (e.g., courses, internships, apprenticeships, socialization) in shaping the choices of potential teacher and professional career candidates. The continued focus on increasing the pipeline into teaching generally and into special education specifically makes the relative neglect of this research even more perplexing.

Influencing the Choice to Teach

Preservice educators, including those in special education, often have anxiety about their ability to meet the needs of their students with disabilities and be successful (Bowlin, Bell, Coleman, & Cihak, 2015; Ruppar, Neeper & Dalsen, 2016), including managing behavior issues that may arise in the classroom (Butler & Monda-Amaya, 2016; Kaufman & Moss, 2010; Westling, 2010). To better understand how to prepare students to enter the special education profession, research has explored a variety of factors, including the extent to which pre-service teachers understand and are prepared to enter the profession, their beliefs about teaching and teaching students with disabilities, the opportunities they have to examine and critically self-reflect on their own beliefs about students and to engage with curriculum, materials, and field experiences that provide information, knowledge, and skill building about diverse populations (Bowlin, Bell, Coleman, & Cihak, 2015; Bruinsma & Jansen, 2010; Ruppar, Neeper & Dalsen, 2016).

Research has explored the learning experiences that candidates in educator preparation programs, including special education preparation programs, engage in during their studies and how these experiences influence their knowledge, disposition, skills, and even their decision to teach in special education. For instance, some studies have explored the role of coursework in shaping candidates' pursuit of teaching special education (Leko et al., 2015), their beliefs about inclusion (Sharma & Sokal, 2015; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008; Sokal & Sharma, 2017) and their practice once they were in the field (McElwee, Regan, Baker, & Weiss, 2018). Billingsley & Bettini (2019) highlight how these experiences may vary greatly by

program and program type (university- or practice-based). For the past decade, greater attention has been given to the breadth of experiences teacher candidates have, particularly those that stretch beyond coursework experiences (e.g., lectures, cases, video analysis, simulations, lesson studies, coaching, reflection) to student teaching, field, and residency experiences (Brownwell et al., 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017; O'Brien et al., 2023).

In the few examples of research exploring factors that influence why preservice teachers decide to pursue special education careers, findings suggest that personal values such as empathy and commitment to special education as well as social support are more influential than salary (Stephens & Fish, 2010; Zhang, Whitford, Hsu & Wang, 2020). Other studies have addressed the influence of preservice candidates' own experiences with special education services as an influence on their beliefs, empathy, and reported self-efficacy (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Ferris al., 2001; Leko et al., 2015; Riddick, 2003; Zhang, et al., 2014). Additional research (Leko et al., 2015; Specht et al., 2016; Sokal & Sharma, 2017; Zhang et al., 2014) has also highlighted how preservice teachers who had friends who were identified with special needs reported higher levels of teacher efficacy to use inclusive instruction and exhibited less fixed mindsets about their impact in the field. Notably, Zhang et al. (2014), who studied pre-service teachers in their first special education class, found that special education teaching efficacy indirectly predicted interest and commitment to individuals with disabilities and special education outcome expectations, and that interest/commitment to serve individuals with disabilities was a direct and significant predictor of their intention to pursue a special education career, and that personal and work experiences had a significant and indirect effect on students' interest and commitment to serving students in special education.

Creating Opportunities to Expand the Special Education Teaching Pipeline

In the previous section we considered the factors that may influence a preservice candidate's choice to pursue teaching in special education. Here we explore a complementary idea—how might the field identify and encourage those considering a career in special education. To do so, we turn our attention briefly to possibilities for expanding the special education teacher pipeline and the levers that may exist to further increase the number of practicing special education teachers.

Billingsley and Cross (1991) examined how general education teachers viewed special education teaching once in the field to determine the viability of teachers transferring to special education. Specifically, they sought to understand what motivated general education teachers to obtain special education endorsements, why general education teachers ultimately do not pursue special education, and their willingness to teach in special education. They explored questions about the impact of deterrents (e.g., factors such as lack of support, student concerns, and administrative obstacles), influence of incentives (e.g., factors such as administrative support, professional treatment, and availability of desired position) and feelings about preparedness and areas of needed additional training. Their study, which is one of only a few studies that focus on the role of the preparation program in

candidate choices to pursue special education, contributed to framing the existence of a "reserve pool" of potential special education teachers. Billingsly and Cross (1991) defined the reserve pool as those individuals who are certified or hold endorsements in special education but are currently teaching in general education. Billingsly and Cross (1991) notably found that these general education teachers who held special education licenses/endorsements both enjoyed their current position and did not see a need for change, nor did they view special education as appealing. In addition, the general education teachers perceived both "student factors, such as diversity of student needs, disruptive/difficult students, and lack of student progress…" (p. 167) and administrative obstacles (e.g., paperwork, inadequate resources, high caseloads, legal issues/liability) as deterrents.

In educator preparation programs, there continue to be calls to teach inclusive practices across all candidate pathways and for general education candidates to receive training in special education to instill confidence in meeting the needs of students with disabilities (Forlin, & Chambers, 2011). Yet, it is unclear how frequently or in-depth this training occurs. Most K-12 students who receive special education are served in an inclusive setting where it is expected that the general education and special education teachers are collaborating in instructional planning, instruction, assessment, and provision of student supports. Yet, many educator preparation programs for general education and special education remain separate (Blanton, & Pugach, 2011). The limited integration of special education content and experiences (e.g., coursework, clinical and field experiences, skill development) into general education programs may hinder prospective educators' ability to fully consider a pathway into special education and the ability of educators to maximally serve students with disabilities in their least restrictive and inclusive environments (Blanton, & Pugach, 2011; Pellegrino & Weiss, 2017; Weiss, Pelligrino, Brigham, 2017; Zagona, Kurth, MacFarland, 2017).

Methods

For this study, data were collected via a UEPC survey of preservice teachers from across the state of Utah. Statistical analysis of Likert-type survey items and qualitative analysis of open-ended responses were used to better understand preservice teachers' preferences about teaching in special education or general education and their perceptions and understandings of the special education teaching profession.

Pre-service Teacher Special Education Perceptions Survey

Recruitment

The UEPC, in consultation with the USBE, discussed a recruitment plan that included engagement with institutions of higher education in the state who are preparing special education teachers. As a result, before recruiting study participants, UEPC met with the Utah Teacher Education Assessment & Accreditation Council (UTEAAC)—a collection of representatives from colleges and universities across the state—and shared information about this study, including plans for recruiting student participants from their programs. UEPC followed up via email with the eight colleges and universities with study

documentation, IRB information, and a request to receive (via a secure file-sharing platform) contact information for all students who were enrolled in or had completed the introductory education course and/or an introductory special education course between the fall 2020 and spring 2023 semesters. A total of five institutions agreed to participate and shared information with UEPC. Subsequently, the survey was disseminated via email in October 2023 with individualized links to students, using Qualtrics survey software.

Survey description

The survey design included five parts, as described in Table 1. Qualitative data were collected from participants via open-ended survey questions about: 1) why preservice teachers were (or were not) interested in teaching special education, 2) how personal connections to teaching or special education influenced their career decisions (if applicable), and 3) what most informed their understanding of the special education teaching profession.

Table 1. Survey sections and example items

Survey section	Example items	Scale
Background and demographics	• Gender, race, age • Program type (e.g., bachelor's, master's), progress toward program completion, plans after graduation • Previous work experience in (special) education • Personal connections to (special) education (e.g., friend or family member who received special education services, friend or family member who is/was a teacher, teacher who inspired me to teach)	Multiple
Interest	• Separate items assessing interest in teaching special education and general education	4-point scale from "not at all" to "to a great extent"
Motivations	*In choosing a profession, how important are the following to you?* • Advice from a mentor or role model, job stability/security, retirement benefits, alignment with personal values, opportunity to work with children/young adults.	4-point scale from "unimportant" to "very important"
Perceptions	*What differences do you see between special and general education teaching? Teachers...*	*5-point scale:* 1 - much more in general education,

	• Help those who need it most, have an impact on students' lives, are well respected by other teachers, spend time doing administrative work or paperwork, and have the opportunity to pursue school leadership positions.	2 - more in general education, 3 - no difference, 4 - more in special education, 5 - much more in special education
Sources of information about the special education teaching profession	*To what extent have the following informed your understanding of the special education teaching profession:* • Coursework during my preparation program, student teaching, personal experience with special education, and previous work experience	5-point scale from "not at all" to "extremely"

Survey Participants

UEPC received 260 responses from the 3,141[1] students who were invited to participate, for a response rate of 8%. More details about the survey sample are included in tables 2-6. After an initial review of the sample, participants who indicated that they were *not* pursuing a bachelor's degree (n=34) were removed to improve the alignment between the sample and the target population (degree-seeking undergraduates). Given that the small number of participants pursuing pathways other than bachelor's degrees were varied (e.g., master's degrees, no longer enrolled, seeking licensure only), removing these responses makes the sample more uniform and the analyses thus more easily interpreted, without significantly diminishing the sample size.

As shown in Table 2, response rates range from 6-12% across higher education teacher preparation programs. Most participants were enrolled in programs at Salt Lake Community College (n=87), Weber State University (n=73), and Southern Utah University (n=72), while a smaller proportion of participants are enrolled in programs at the University of Utah (n=16) and Utah State University (n=12). As shown in Table 3, participants varied in terms of how far along they were in their program, with 20% in their first year, 52% who completed their first year but were not in their final year, and 29% in their final year. Tables 4 and 5 show that participants were primarily white (83%) and female (82%). Lastly, Table 6 shows that most participants were between ages 18-25 (77%).

[1] Student information was collected in spring 2023. We cannot verify that these are the primary email contacts for participants, so some potential participants may not have been aware of the invitation. Of those invited, 66% percent opened the survey.

Table 2. Program response rates

	Salt Lake CC	Southern Utah	Utah State	Utah	Weber St.	Total
Responses (including those not pursuing a bachelor's)	71 (87)	69 (72)	9 (12)	12 (16)	72 (73)	233 (260)
Total	1178	587	183	261	932	3141
Response rate (based on total responses)	**7%**	**12%**	**7%**	**6%**	**8%**	**8%**

Table 3. Program year

Program year	
Currently in my first year	20%
Completed first year but not in final year	52%
Final year of program	29%

Table 4. Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	<1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4%
Black or African American	2%
Hispanic	4%
Multiple ethnicity	5%
White/Caucasian	83%
Prefer not to answer	2%

Table 5. Gender

Gender	
Woman	82%
Man	17%
Nonbinary or gender non-conforming	<1%

Table 6. Age groups

Age Group*	
21 and under	42%
22-25	35%
26-29	6%
30-39	7%
40+	10%

*Age groups are based on participants' year of birth and ages are therefore approximate.

Quantitative Analysis

Cluster analysis was used to reduce three large sets of Likert-type items from the survey: 1) items related to motivation, 2) items related to perceptions of special education versus general education, and 3) items related to sources of information about the special education teaching profession. Clusters were generated to condense multiple items into clusters, improving the interpretability of means comparisons and multiple regression analyses throughout the report. Cluster analysis is used as an alternative to factor analysis, examining the correlations between items and grouping them into clusters that maximize the internal consistency within each cluster (measured by α) (Revelle & Zinbarg, 2009). Each cluster can be interpreted as measuring a different underlying dimension or construct. Clusters for each item set are described in tables 7-9. In cases in which cluster analysis produced groupings with low reliability ($\alpha < 0.70$) or groupings were not interpretable as a single construct, individual items were retained and used in subsequent analyses.

Table 7. Motivations

Cluster	**Description**
Values and success (9 items, α= 0.82)	Motivated by a desire to make a difference in society and find a career that aligns with personal values and interests, as well as a career in which I can succeed
Salary/benefits (8 items, α= 0.84)	Motivated by benefits and salary, job security, and the convenience of a daily/annual work schedule
Individual items	The opportunity to work with children/young adults, advice from a mentor or role model, availability of educational funding (e.g., scholarships)

Table 8. Perceptions

Cluster	Description
Support and opportunities (8 items, α= 0.79)	Perceptions of opportunities to pursue other teaching placements and leadership positions, perceived respect and support from other teachers and school administrators, as well as perceived collaboration with other teachers
Individual items	Having an impact on students' lives and academic success, helping those who need it most, caring and nurturing personality, building relationships with students, and workload/job responsibilities (e.g., content-area teaching and planning, paperwork, administering assessments)

*Table 9. Sources of information**

Cluster	Description
Field experience (2 items, α= 0.86)	Practicum or student teaching during a preparation program
Experience in special education (2 items, α= 0.81)	Personal or previous work experience related to special education
Individual items	Coursework during my preparation program; coursework prior to or outside of my preparation program; news/media

*Students were asked to respond to the following question stem for these items: *To what extent have the following informed your understanding of the special education teaching profession.*

Means comparisons, including t-tests and analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to identify differences in perceptions and sources of understanding about the special education teaching profession. T-tests were used to compare means between two groups, while ANOVA was used to test for significant differences between multiple groups, based on means of a single outcome variable. For instance, ANOVA was used to determine whether preservice teachers' perceptions of general education and special education teachers (outcome variable) differed based on program year (whether a student was in their first year of the program, between their first and final year, or in their final year). Using an ANOVA, we tested whether significant differences exist among any of these categories. In cases when ANOVAs showed significant differences, post-hoc Tukey tests were used to examine the significance of pairwise differences.

Multiple regression was used to test how well certain variables predicted an outcome variable. Multiple regression is used in cases where a single outcome (such as a preservice teachers' interest in teaching special education) is predicted by a combination of variables (such as motivations for choosing a profession, past work experience, and personal connections to special education). The result of multiple regression is a statistical model: a formula which can be used to interpret the role of each predictor variable in predicting the outcome variable and the overall strength of using given variables to predict an outcome variable. Throughout this report, different variables were used as outcomes, including interest in teaching special education, interest in teaching general education, and perceptions of the special education profession (e.g., job responsibilities, workload, impact on students' lives). Various combinations of variables were applied as predictor variables to understand their relationship to outcomes, including personal connections to teaching, factors related to motivation for choosing a profession, program year (e.g., first, final, or in between), age, and past work experience. To improve the fit of the model, forward and

backward stepwise selection using the Akaike Information Criterion were used to retain only those predictor variables that, in combination, were most related to the outcome.

Qualitative Analysis of Open-ended Survey Responses

As noted previously, participants had the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions regarding why they were (or were not) interested in teaching special education, how personal connections to teaching or special education may have influenced their career decisions, and what most-informed their understanding of the special education teaching profession. These responses were analyzed using ATLAS.ti (version 9) qualitative analysis software. Participant responses to each question were organized and coded initially by question and then as a corpus of data (i.e., texts in their entirety). Data were analyzed with a combination of open and focused coding (Saldaña, 2013) to capture both information relative to the question participants were responding to and to use in vivo codes (i.e., participants' words). Finally, themes, which reflected patterns and relationships in the data, were generated using the coded data. As Saldaña (2013) indicates, "a theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded" (p. 14). Ultimately, the qualitative data provide dimensionality and depth to our quantitative findings as well as triangulation of results.

Open-ended item	**Responses**
Why are you interested in teaching special education? *(Asked to those who indicated moderate or great interest in teaching special education)*	65
Why are you *not* interested in teaching special education? *(Asked to those who indicated little or no interest in teaching special education)*	102
How did your personal connections to education (e.g., self, friend or family member, inspirational teacher, friend or family member who taught) influence your decision to become a teacher?	145
What has most informed your understanding of the special education teaching profession? In what ways?	134

Deciding to teach: Why preservice teachers choose general education or special education

This section presents findings based on analysis of quantitative and qualitative survey data related to preservice teachers' interest in teaching special education and/or general education. First, we present findings on factors that predict candidates' interest in teaching special education and why they choose to pursue a career in special education. Findings related to predictive factors and reasoning for choosing general education follow. Finally, this section concludes with findings comparing overall interest levels in each area and how interest in teaching shifts or evolves for candidates during their preparation program. Findings suggest that past work experience and personal connections are meaningful predictors of interest in teaching special education, while a desire to work with children, inspiration from a former teacher, and past work experience are predictors of interest in teaching general education.

Special Education

We identified two key findings related to preservice teachers' interest levels in teaching in special education:

- Interest in special education was predicted by past work experience in special education, advice from a mentor, and perceptions of teacher workload.
- Preservice educators interested in teaching special education cited a desire to make an impact, personal connections, and a passion for promoting understanding and inclusivity.

Interest in special education was predicted by past work experience in special education, advice from a mentor, and perceptions of teacher workload.

To identify variables that predicted interest in special education teaching, we started with a large set of variables that included items related to motivations, perceptions, personal connections to education, age, and past work experience. We then applied forward and backward stepwise selection to a regression model to winnow that list and identify the combination of predictors that collectively best explained interest in special education. Interest was indicated using a 4-point scale from 1 ("not at all") to 4 ("To a great extent"). Ultimately, a model with three significant factors was identified as best predicting interest in special education, explaining 32% of the variance. The three factors included: 1) previous work experience in special education (as a paraeducator or teaching assistant), 2) advice from a mentor or role model, and 3) perceived differences between special education and

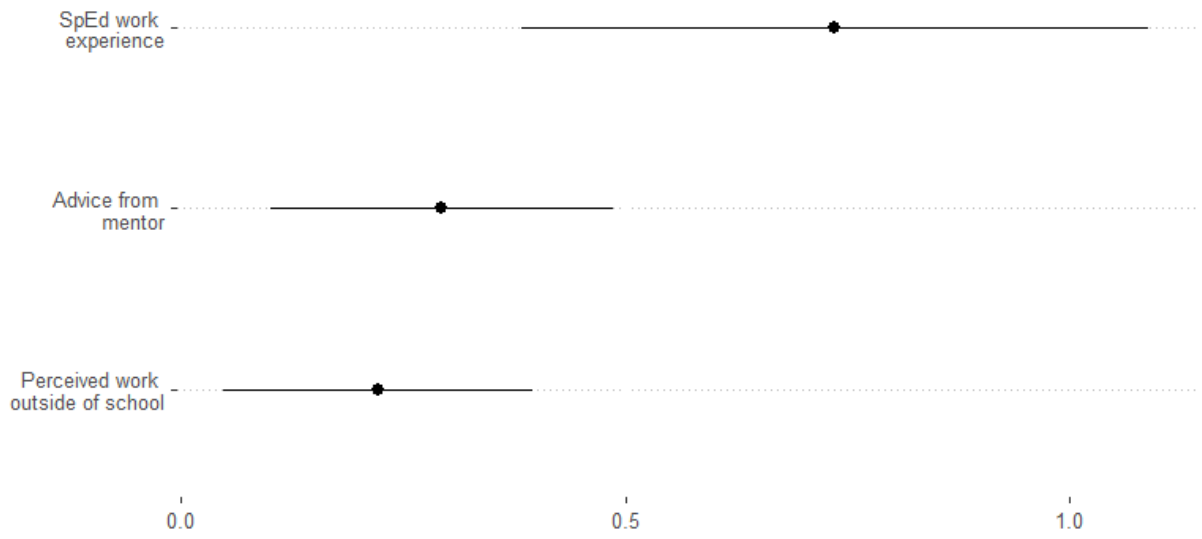
general education teachers regarding the amount of time spent working outside of school hours (e.g., grading, lesson-planning). Figure 1 shows the coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for the three factors. Coefficients indicate the strength and direction of the relationship between the predictor and outcome variables. For instance, a 0.74 coefficient for the factor "previous work experience in special education" indicates that having that experience is associated with a 0.74 increase in interest in teaching special education (on the 4-point scale). Similarly, a 0.29 coefficient for the factor "advice from a mentor/role model" indicates that a one-unit increase (on a four-point scale) in the extent to which advice from a mentor/role model was seen as important in choosing a profession is associated with a 0.29 increase in interest in special education. The relative size of the coefficients (0.74 vs. 0.29) reflects the relative strength of their relationship with interest in special education, although it's important to keep in mind that the 0.74 refers to a contrast between those who have previous experience and those who don't, whereas the 0.29 refers to a 1-point increase on a 4-point scale. A contrast between people who answered 1 and people who answered 4 for the importance of advice from a mentor would produce a coefficient of 0.87 (0.29 x 3). All three coefficients were positive, indicating that higher levels of each of these factors are associated with increases in interest in teaching special education.

Overall, the model suggests that among the preservice teachers we surveyed, previous work experience in special education as a teaching assistant or paraeducator is the strongest predictor of interest in teaching special education, followed by the importance of advice from a mentor or role model in choosing a profession, and finally perceived differences between special and general educators in the amount of time spent working outside of school hours. It is important to note that these findings suggest correlation, not causation. That is, while there is a strong positive correlation between experience and interest in special education, it is not possible to conclude that experience in special education as a paraeducator or teaching assistant *leads to* interest in special education.

Factors based on perceived differences between special and general educators require additional interpretation. The survey asked participants to judge whether some work activities (e.g., administering standardized tests, working outside of school hours) were more characteristic of special educators or general educators using a 5-point scale, with 1 = much more in general education, 3 = no difference, and 5 = much more in special education. The positive and significant coefficients for the item that appears in this model—spending time working outside of school hours—indicates that as interest in special education increases, preservice teacher ratings of who spends more time working outside of school hours shift more toward the special education end of the scale. This is somewhat surprising because working longer hours is generally regarded as undesirable, yet greater interest in special education teaching tends to be associated with higher expectations that working outside of school hours is typical for special educators. This finding may indicate that students interested in special education have accepted the hard work that it will demand. These students are not expecting that special education will somehow be easier than general

education but rather the opposite. This finding suggests that appeals to students' work ethic may be effective in messaging: students may be proud of the sacrifices they are willing to make and may in fact see those as part of the identity of being a special educator.

Figure 1. Regression coefficients for significant factors in predicting preservice teacher interest in special education



Preservice educators interested in teaching special education cited a desire to make an impact, personal connections, and a passion for promoting understanding and inclusivity.

Preservice educators who expressed interest in teaching special education in Likert-type items were asked to share more about why they were interested in special education. In total, 62 participants responded to the initial open-ended survey item and provided comments, additional data from other open-ended items were further analyzed to inform this finding. There were three primary motivations cited by participants for teaching special education. These three motivations included a desire to make an impact, personal connections, and a passion for inclusivity. As the following discussion highlights, sometimes, these motivations were intertwined with one another.

A desire to make an impact

Many preservice teachers who indicated an interest in teaching special education cited their strong desire to make a meaningful impact on the lives of students with disabilities. A participant noted:

> *I want to be able to help others who are overlooked by our current general education system. I want to give all students an equal chance at receiving an education.*

Other participants connected their interest in teaching to confidence and experience working with students with disabilities. Similar to quantitative survey findings, the following quote provides an example of how work experience in special education can provide first-hand understanding of the potential impact of teaching special education:

> *It's what I deeply enjoy. I have spent the last two years working at a job where we take care of individuals with disabilities. I have seen the difference good teachers make in their lives and abilities to succeed. I feel more confident in helping them succeed than any other student in the school.*

Notably, while participants often explained that all teachers address students' needs, they also viewed the role of a special education teacher as one that goes beyond academics. The opportunity to contribute to students' growth and success was described as deeply fulfilling, further reinforcing their commitment to the field. To this end, many participants saw special education as a field where they could more directly address the needs of students, regardless of their abilities, to ensure they had access to educational opportunities that supported their holistic growth. As one participant described,

> *I have always wanted to make a positive impact on the lives of students with special needs. Teaching special education allows me to utilize my personal experiences and knowledge to create an inclusive and nurturing environment where every student can grow to reach their full potential.*

Participants often saw themselves as advocates who could champion the needs of students who might otherwise be overlooked, making special education a rewarding and purposeful career choice. They spoke of moments when students reached significant milestones—whether academic, social, or personal—and how these achievements reinforced their commitment to the field. For example, helping a non-verbal student learn to communicate or seeing a student with behavioral challenges successfully integrate into a general education classroom were cited as profoundly fulfilling experiences, as the following quotes illustrate:

> *The greatest influence for me when deciding to… become a teacher was my son, who has Autism. I've seen the difference every teacher can have. I've seen how strong of an advocate the teacher and parent/caregiver need to be. I believe I can make a difference for every single one of my students and that is the reason I went back to school in education.*

> *I am interested in teaching special education because I want to be able to give back to the community who helped me with my children when they were going through the school system. I want to make a positive impact on the lives of students with special needs, just as the community supported my own children. Teaching special education allows me to utilize my personal experiences and knowledge to create an inclusive and nurturing environment where every student can thrive. Witnessing their growth, development, and achievements brings me immense joy and fulfillment.*

Each of these examples overlap with the two subsections that follow—personal connections and a passion for promoting understanding and inclusivity—while also providing context for the quantitative factors previously described. These open-ended responses suggest that one reason previous work experience in teaching special education may be a strong predictor of interest in teaching is that those individuals have had an opportunity to see the potential impact of their work and want to continue making a difference.

Personal connections to special education

Many participants who indicated their desire to pursue teaching in special education highlighted their personal connections to individuals with disabilities. These connections, whether they were positive or negative, were cited as a central motivation in participants' decision to pursue a career in special education. For example, a participant noted:

> *Having a sibling with special needs and several family members who were amazing teachers/administrators that left long-lasting impacts on students lives were a huge factor in choosing what I chose to study. I think high value education stems from high value teachers and that's something I would like to be myself. Also having a sibling who didn't get the support they needed as a special needs student in a general education classroom also contributed significantly.*

Participants highlighted how their firsthand connections provided early exposure to the unique needs and challenges faced by students with disabilities. In some cases, participants explained that they themselves were recipients of special education services and recounted stories of educators who had an impact on their educational experiences and the decision to pursue their educator credentials in special education. In the two quotes below, participants explained why they felt they were well suited for teaching in special education:

> *Since I was in special education through K-12 I feel I am better able to understand and connect with students who also have disabilities like me.*
>
> *My whole life changed when I was a child because of the services I received in Special education. Once I became a paraprofessional, I knew that I wanted to enter this career field.*

For many, the relationships they had with family members, friends, or their own experiences in special education helped them develop both empathy and responsibility for students with disabilities. These experiences not only deepened participants' understanding of the value of special education but also solidified their commitment to ensuring that other students receive the opportunities and support they need to thrive. A participant explained:

> *I want to make a difference in children with disabilities and adaptive needs. I have many people I love who have struggled in school because of disabilities and they were not able to get the help they needed because of the high workload of special education teachers and the refusal of general education*

teachers to collaborate. I feel a strong kinship with people who have disabilities, and it feels like it is my responsibility to help make their life better.

A passion for promoting opportunities and inclusivity for students in special education

A passion for inclusivity was a significant motivator for individuals pursuing a career in special education. The two quotes below offer examples of how participants' passion for special education extended to advocacy and a desire to promote inclusivity and belongingness:

> *I want to be a change for those families as well to be an advocate for them as well… I am interested in special education because I feel like all kids need an advocate.*
>
> *I am passionate about advocating for equal opportunities in education and empowering students to reach their full potential. By teaching special education, I hope to inspire and support students, while also fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance within the community.*

Participants often framed their interest in special education as a desire to create learning environments where all students, regardless of ability, feel valued and included. For instance, a participant, who cited their own education and diagnosis, described it this way:

> *I am interested in teaching special education because I myself was not given the opportunity for education that would have helped me succeed at a younger age. I have been diagnosed with Autism very late in life and I feel children need someone who can relate and understand them. It feels as though it is a taboo field and I would like to bring a fresh perspective to it. I would want to show people that disability will never be the most important part of a child and that it never makes them less of a person.*

Inclusivity reflected an ability to foster a broader sense of belonging and acceptance within the classroom and the school community. For instance, a participant said:

> *I want to do what I love, which is helping students that need more help. It is a passion of mine to work with our special needs kiddos. I love seeing the neurodiversity in each student, the way that they learn and helping them learn things in the way they need to learn.*

Other participants who had a personal connection to special education—their own experiences or those of family members—discussed how they wanted to make a difference:

> *Becoming a teacher for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing is a passion and dream of mine. My [sibling], made me realize what I wanted to do because he was born Deaf but has cochlear implants now. He showed me that I have a passion and dream to help and teach children that are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. I have taken 7 years of American Sign Language (ASL), just so I could communicate with my brother and others also, but it also showed me that I want to be able to also teach my students ASL.*

I used to be in special education and I want to help kids catch up to the rest of the class just like I did in middle school. A large part of my success was due to my mom always working with me. I had many teachers that gave up on me and didn't want to try as hard to help. I want to be a special education teacher that doesn't give up on students who are struggling or behind.

General Education

We identified three key findings related to preservice teachers' interest levels in teaching in general education:

- Interest in general education was predicted by motivation to work with children/young adults, inspiration from a former teacher, perceptions of workload, and past work experience.
- Preservice educators interested in teaching general education expressed personal and professional reasons for not wanting to teach in special education.
- A small number of survey respondents indicated that they were no longer interested in pursuing teaching as a career path.

Interest in general education was predicted by motivation to work with children/young adults, inspiration from a former teacher, perceptions of workload, and past work experience.

The same approach for developing a model to predict interest in special education was used to predict interest in general education among preservice teacher survey respondents. For general education, a four-factor model was identified, explaining 25% of the variance in interest in teaching special education[2]. The four significant factors for predicting interest in general education included: 1) the importance of working with children/young adults as a motivation for choosing a profession, 2) having a former teacher that inspired them to teach, 3) previous work experience in special education (as a paraeducator or teaching assistant; note that this was *negatively* related to interest in general education; more on this below), and 4) perceived differences between special education and general education teachers regarding the amount of time spent working outside of school hours (e.g., grading, lesson-planning). Figure 2 shows the coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for the four factors. Coefficients indicate the strength and direction of the relationship between the predictor and outcome variables.

[2] The difference in explanatory power in general education and special education may be due to less variance in interest in general education compared to special education among this sample. Differences in general education and special education interest are explored further later in this report.

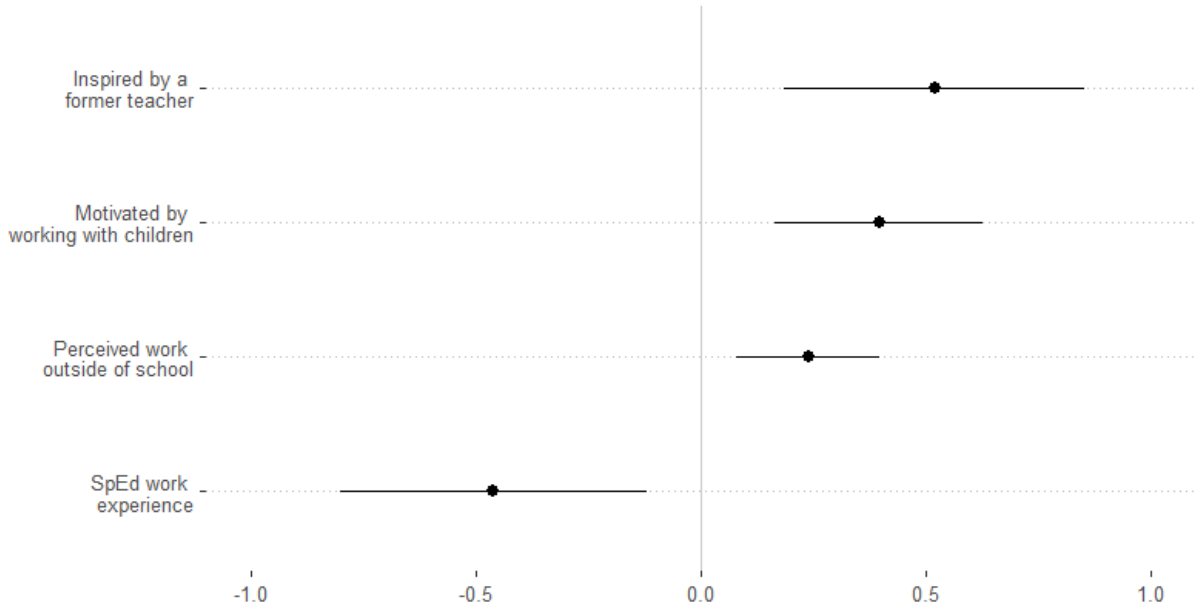
Overall, the model suggests that motivation to work with children/young adults and the presence of a former teacher who inspired them to teach were the strongest predictors of interest in teaching in general education among the preservice teachers we surveyed. The inspiration by a former teacher resembles one of the effects identified in the previous section on interest in special education: advice from a mentor or role model. In both cases, there is support for the powerful influence that current teachers can have on inspiring future generations of educators. Given these findings, one potential application for increasing recruitment of future teachers is to inform current teachers of this influence and to invite them to encourage promising students by expressing confidence that they would make good teachers.

In contrast to the special education model, previous experience in special education as a teaching assistant or paraeducator was *negatively* associated with interest in general education—meaning that previous work experience in special education corresponds to lower interest in general education (but higher interest in special education, as we noted above). Additional analysis found that there is not a significant correlation between interest in special education and interest in general education (r = -0.13), suggesting that interest in general and special education are generally independent of one another; many students expressed strong interest in both. It is important to remember, however, that this survey includes only preservice teachers, not a general population of students. As such, this finding suggests that past experience in special education correlates with less interest in general education compared to other preservice teachers, but that preservice teachers with special education experience may still have more interest in teaching in general education than a broader population of undergraduate students. Because this analysis is correlational, it would be unwise to conclude that working in special education settings *causes* a decreased interest in pursuing general education. An equally valid interpretation is that experience working in special education settings is simply a marker (rather than a cause) for preservice teachers who have already chosen their path in special education rather than general education. Future research could explore this causal question using an experiment: do preservice teachers who are randomly assigned to a special education experience tend to show increased interest in special education, relative to preservice teachers in a control group? Or does that experience simply reinforce preservice teachers' pre-existing preferences for special versus general education?

Lastly, the model shows that as perceptions of the amount of time spent working outside of school hours shifts more toward the general education teacher end of the survey scale, interest in general education increases. This item was significant in both special education and general education models, suggesting differing perceptions among preservice teachers based on their interest in teaching special education or general education. Interestingly, these findings suggest that those with greater interest in general education believe that general education teachers work more outside of school hours, while those with greater

interest in special education believe that special education teachers work more outside of school hours. Further details about perceived differences between general and special education teachers are reported in a later section.

Figure 2. Regression coefficients for significant factors in predicting preservice teacher interest in general education.



Preservice educators interested in teaching general education expressed personal and professional reasons for not wanting to teach in special education.

Notably, many participants in this study cited a multitude of reasons for their lack of interest in teaching in special education. Among those who indicated that they weren't interested, some explained that they were more invested in teaching a particular grade level (e.g., elementary) or subject matter (e.g., math, science) or there was a misalignment between their personal strengths and interest and special education generally. Here is how some of the participants explained this:

> *I'd prefer not to teach in special education, because I don't think I have enough experience in that field. I am much more passionate about teaching a specific topic. Additionally, I don't believe I have enough patience for special education. I have profound respect for those who are able to do it, but it just doesn't fit the life I want to pursue. Teachers don't make enough as it is, and special education teachers really do deserve a lot more than they get.*

I personally have a greater interest in general education because I feel that I would be able to interact with a greater number of students in that role.

I am not as interested in teaching special education because I have a love for science. I am so excited to be a science teacher for all students

Other participants noted that they didn't have the personal characteristics (e.g., patience, beliefs about the capability of students abilities), previous experiences (e.g., personal or vicarious experiences of others), knowledge (e.g., understanding of legal system, understanding of the needs of students with disabilities), skills (e.g., pedagogical), or experiences (e.g., from course work, internships) they perceived as necessary to succeed as a special education teacher. As some participants said,

I think that it takes a dedicated person to be an educator in general, but I think it takes an extra special person to be a SpEd educator.

I deeply admire and respect the people who teach special education. I am not interested because I don't feel like I have the necessary skills to properly educate and care for the students.

I'm just not built for it. I'm not great at handling it. I leave it to the professionals who've devoted their lives to it. I love the kids, and I will teach them, but I am not made for special Ed. It's just not my strength.

Sometimes, the experiences of friends and family members were also a deterrent to pursuing teaching in special education. As one participant said,

My mother just recently moved from general to special education. She feels like most of her job is paperwork and website programs. She feels she almost doesn't have her own students anymore because she only sees a specific group. 2-3 times a week.

A few participants indicated that current conditions (e.g., paperwork, lack of resources, lack of support) made teaching in special education not an option. Here are a few of the comments that participants made about current conditions that persuaded them not to seek teaching in special education.

I am interested in teaching special education for a variety of reasons, but I have seen first-hand how hard the job is in reality and would not pursue it until special education teachers get the help they deserve.

Through working various jobs in education, I have seen a distinct lack of adequate staff for special education. I don't ever want to work in an environment that always feels understaffed, overworked, and underpaid. I also really enjoy teaching the content I'm studying which wouldn't be the same in a special education setting.

I am not interested in teaching special education because I am not interested in spending all the additional time in the class doing paperwork. Special Education has a lot of demands that take up time outside of contact hours. This is based on what I have seen while working with 3 different Special Education teachers.

A small number of survey respondents indicated that they were no longer interested in pursuing teaching as a career path.

Only a few of the participants indicated that they no longer planned on teaching either in special education or general education. Of those who indicated they did not plan to teach at all, they too cited current conditions or previous experiences as their reasons for no longer pursuing teaching. For instance, a few participants said:

I am not interested in teaching at all. I don't want politicians who have never been in my position making decisions about my job. Teachers don't get enough support or respect no matter their position. They also are expected to work outside school hours without adequate pay. I'm not going to sacrifice my wellbeing for other adults who are making bank while being irresponsible with their power.

Through volunteering in a hostile junior high classroom during my Intro to Education class, I realized I would not meet my goals for my career by pursuing teaching.

Teachers don't get the recognition or money they deserve. They make such a huge impact on the lives of future generations and put all of their effort into it. I don't want to work in a place that is not going to value the work I do.

Comparing interest levels in general and special education

We identified two additional findings related to preservice teachers' interest levels in teaching general education and/or special education:

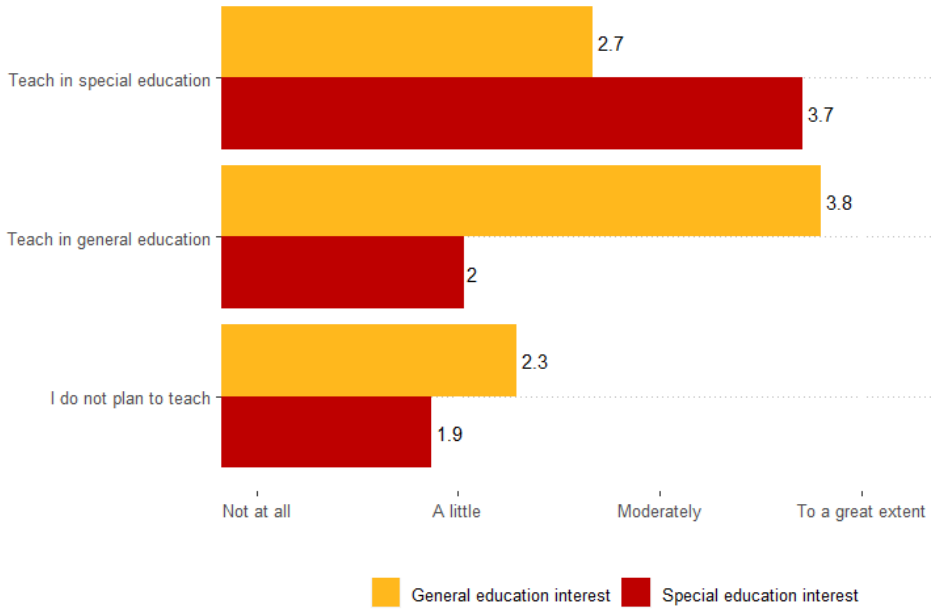
- Overall interest in teaching in general education was greater than interest in teaching in special education.
- Interest levels in general education and special education remain consistent as students progress through their preparation program.

Overall, interest in teaching in general education was greater than interest in teaching in special education.

In addition to asking preservice teachers to rate their interest levels in teaching special education and general education, we also asked about their plans after completing their current program. Responses included three groups: those who plan to teach special education (n=45), those who plan to teach general education (n=156), and those who do not plan to teach (n=32). Figure 3 shows the relationship between preservice teachers' reported interest in teaching either special education or general education and their reported plans for after completing their program.

As expected, levels of interest generally aligned with plans to teach (i.e., high levels of interest in special education by those who planned to teach in special education and the same for general education). Interestingly, those who indicated that they planned to teach in special education also expressed relatively high levels of interest in teaching general education, but the reverse tended not to be true. Specifically, Figure 3 shows that those who said they planned to teach in special education reported, on average, "moderate" interest in teaching general education. Conversely, the same figure shows that those who said they planned to teach in general education were, on average, only "a little" interested in teaching special education. Among those who indicated that they did not plan to teach, interest in teaching special education was lower than interest in teaching general education.

Figure 3. Mean interest levels in teaching, grouped by plans to teach



Interest levels in general education and special education remain consistent as students progress through their preparation program.

In addition to examining factors that predict interest in special education and general education, analyses were conducted to look for differences in interest levels as students progressed through their preparation program. Comparing students at different time points in their program (e.g., in their first year, completed first year but not in final year, and in their final year), no differences were found in levels of interest for either general education or special education. This suggests that interest levels may be more heavily influenced by experiences and perceptions prior to entering a preparation program than by coursework or field experiences gained during the program.

These findings also provide context to findings from the regression analyses. Given that no differences were found based on program year, the significance found in the overall models based on previous work experiences, personal connections, and motivational factors that likely precede enrollment in a teacher preparation program (e.g., inspiration from a former teacher, advice from a mentor/role model, interest in working with children) may be read as factors rooted in experiences prior to entering a preparation program. Overall, these analyses suggest that interest levels generally remain consistent during a student's preparation program, and that key motivational factors for pursuing a career in general education or special education may be rooted in prior knowledge and experiences.

Differences in perception: How preservice teachers view general and special education teaching roles

This section presents findings based on an analysis of quantitative survey data related to preservice teachers' perceptions of general education and special education teaching roles, including workload, responsibilities, and student impact. In the survey, participants were asked to rate whether items were more associated with general education or special education. These items were analyzed to explore key differences in preservice teacher perceptions about special education and general education. Additionally, we analyzed how these perceptions varied depending on whether a preservice teacher planned to teach in general education or special education.

We identified two key findings related to how preservice teachers perceive workload, responsibilities, and student impact, comparing general education teachers to special education teachers:

- Preservice teachers perceived general education teachers as receiving more support from their colleagues and having more opportunities to advance than special education teachers, while special education teachers were perceived as spending more time managing student behavior and doing administrative/paperwork than general education teachers.
- Preservice teacher perceptions of teacher workloads, responsibilities, and impact on students varied based on whether they planned to teach in general education or special education.

Preservice teachers perceived general education teachers as receiving more support from their colleagues and having more opportunities to advance than special education teachers, while special education teachers were perceived as spending more time managing student behavior and doing administrative/paperwork than general education teachers.

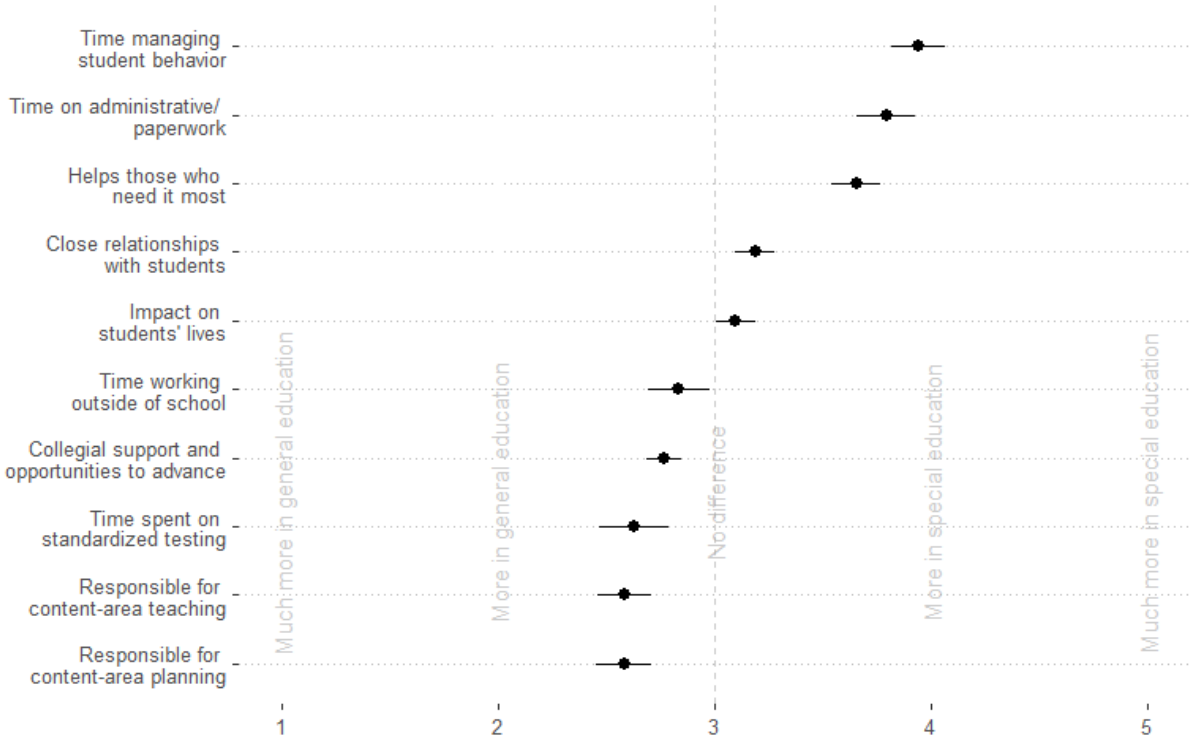
Figure 4 illustrates the perceptions of preservice teachers across a range of items. Respondents rated each item on a five-point scale, where 1 = much more in general education, 2 = more in general education, 3 = no difference, 4 = more in special education, and 5 = much more in special education. The figure shows mean ratings as circles and 95% confidence intervals for those means as whiskers extending from the circles. For instance, "collegial support and opportunities to advance" has an overall mean of 2.76, suggesting that students perceive support and opportunities as slightly more characteristic of general educators than special education teachers.

All items shown in Figure 4 are significantly different from the midpoint on the scale, indicating that participants saw every item as significantly ($p < .05$) more associated with either special or general education, although the strength of these associations differed. Figure 4 shows an asymmetry in the perceptions of special and general educators in which special educators have some features that are more clearly associated with them (the mean ratings approach "more in special education"), whereas there is more uncertainty and less clarity regarding features associated with general educators (the mean ratings never make it more than halfway between "no difference" and "more in general education"). This asymmetry can be observed in Figure 4 by the fact that the items associated with special education teachers have means farther from the "no difference" center line than the items associated with general education teachers. The three items most strongly associated with special education teachers were "spending more time and effort managing student behavior," "doing administrative work or paperwork," and "helping those who need it most."

The four items most strongly associated with general education teachers appear only slightly to the left of the "no difference" mid-line in Figure 4. These items include perceptions of who plans and teaches content-area subjects, who receives collegial support and opportunities for advancement (e.g., support from colleagues, opportunities to move into leadership roles), and who spends time administering standardized tests/assessments. No significant differences were found for one item: perceptions of who has a meaningful impact on students' academic success (thus, this item is not pictured in Figure 4).

The results from this analysis indicate that the sample of preservice teachers had stronger views about special educators and their work than they did for general educators. Special educators were believed to spend more time managing student behavior, working on administrative tasks and paperwork, and helping those who needed it most. Weaker impressions were held about general educators, who were viewed as slightly more likely to be responsible for content-area planning and teaching, spending more time on standardized testing, having more collegial support and opportunities to advance, and spending more time teaching outside of school. The sections above on predicting interest in special and general education found that interest in each area was correlated with an expectation that teachers in that area spend more time working outside of school. This suggests that the overall perceptions about special and general educators that are presented in Figure 4 may conceal important differences of opinion within preservice teachers. These are explored in the next section.

Figure 4. Perceptions of workload, responsibilities, and student impact, comparing special education and general education teachers



Preservice teacher perceptions of teacher workloads, responsibilities, and impact on students varied based on whether they planned to teach in general education or special education.

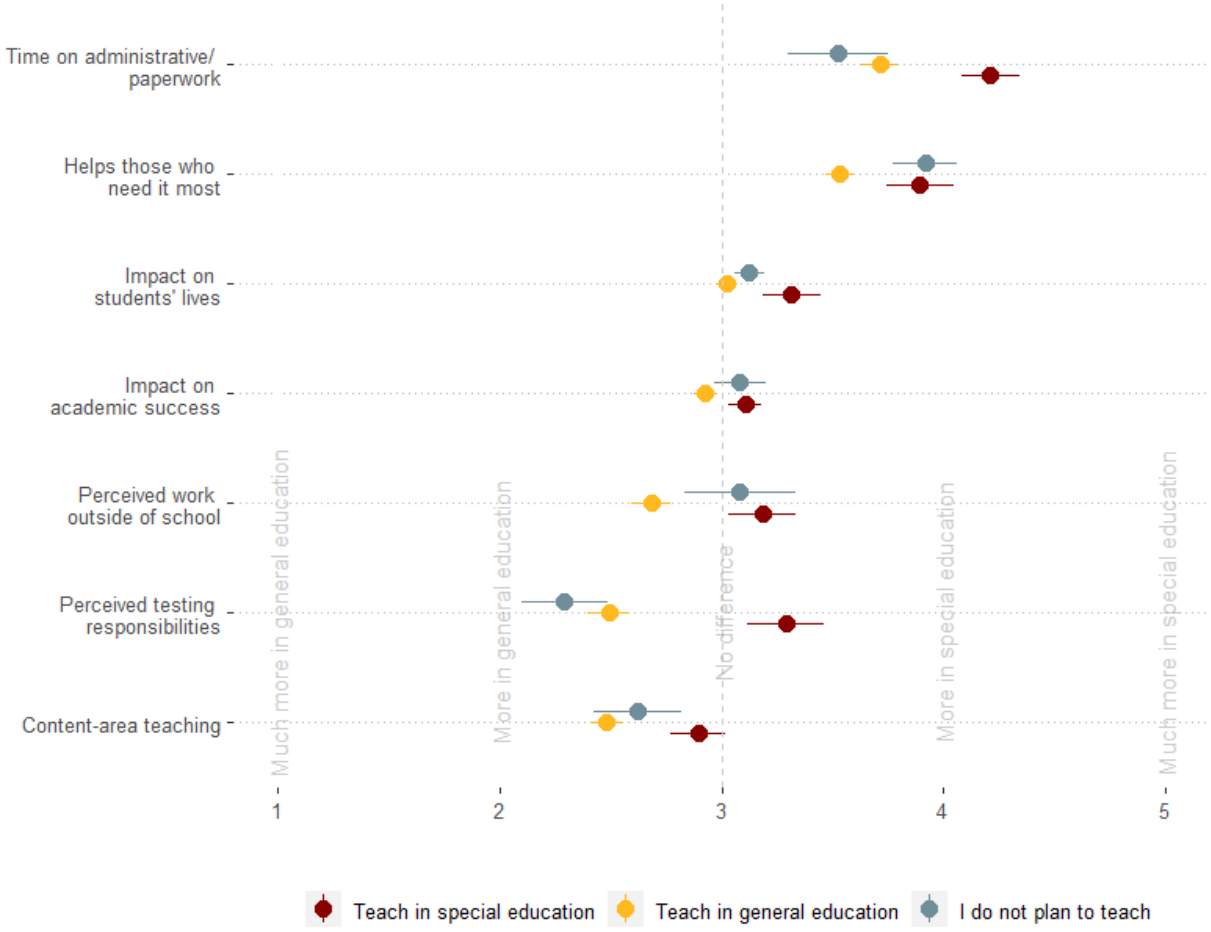
To better understand individual differences in the perceptions of special education and general education teachers, forward and backward stepwise selection was used to generate multiple regression models predicting each perceived difference item from characteristics of respondents. These analyses showed that a respondent's teaching plans (e.g., general education, special education, or no plans to teach) was a significant variable in predicting several perception items and was a stronger predictor of perceptions than a preservice teacher's past teaching experience, their program year, their school, or their age. Given this finding, ANOVAs and post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted to analyze differences in perceptions based on whether preservice teachers planned to teach in general education, special education, or did not plan to teach at all.

Figure 5 shows perception items that varied significantly between those survey participants who indicated plans to teach in general education and those who planned to teach in special education. For each item, means and standard errors for those who do not plan to teach are also shown, although perceptions of these students only differed significantly from one of the other two groups (i.e., they differed from either students who planned to teach in special

education or students who planned to teach in general education, depending on the item). When the means for those planning to teach in general and special education are both on the same side of the "No difference" line, the two groups differ only in degree: they both think that one type of teacher is doing this more than the other; they just vary in how big that difference is. This is the case for "time on administrative tasks and paperwork". Both preservice teachers planning to go into general education and those planning to go into special education perceive special educators as spending more time on administrative tasks and paperwork than general educators, but those planning to go into special education see a larger difference than those planning to go into general education. However, when the means for those planning to teach in general and special education are on opposite sides of the "No difference" line, it means the two groups differ in kind: one group believes that special educators are more characteristic of the trait, while the other group believes that general educators are more characteristic. This is the case for "work outside of school" (as noted above in the models predicting interest in special or general education) as well as for "perceived testing responsibilities".

Overall, these findings suggest that perceptions of general versus special educators vary depending on a preservice teacher's intended teaching plans: general versus special education. The greatest differences were found in preservice teacher perceptions of whether general education or special education teachers spend more time working outside of school hours (noted above) and which teachers are responsible for administering standardized tests. Notably, those who planned to teach in general education perceived general education teachers as spending more time administering standardized tests and working outside of school hours. Those who planned to teach in special education reported the opposite, perceiving special education teachers as spending more time administering standardized tests and working outside of school hours. This may be due to each group's selective interpretation of this activity, with future general educators visualizing state-mandated end-of-year assessments and future special educators visualizing testing associated with the creation of individualized education plans. As Figure 5 shows, time on administrative/paperwork, helping those who need it most, and having an impact on students' lives were all more associated with special education teachers, although those preservice teachers who plan to teach in general education reported these items as closer to no-difference between the two categories of teachers. Content-area teaching was more associated with general education teachers overall, but those who plan to teach in special education felt that that responsibility was closer to no-difference between the teacher groups.

Figure 5. Preservice teacher perceptions of impact, responsibilities, and workload, grouped according to teaching plans



The sources that most inform candidates' understanding of special education

This section presents findings based on analysis of quantitative and qualitative survey data related to the sources of information (e.g., prior experience, coursework, practicum, news/media) that most informed their understanding. We analyzed the extent to which different sources informed participants' understanding and further examined how each information source varied based on preservice teachers' stated plans to teach (i.e., general education or special education).

We identified three key findings related to the sources which informed preservice teachers' understanding of the special education teaching profession:

- Past experience and teaching practicums most informed preservice teachers' understanding of the special education profession, while the extent of understanding varied based on whether they planned to teach in special education or general education.
- Personal experiences provided perspective and understanding of the "realities" of teaching special education.
- Coursework and previous work experiences as a paraprofessional helped shape preservice teachers' expectations and provided insight into the role and responsibilities of special education teaching.

Past experience and teaching practicums most informed preservice teachers' understanding of the special education profession, while the extent of understanding varied based on whether they planned to teach in special education or general education.

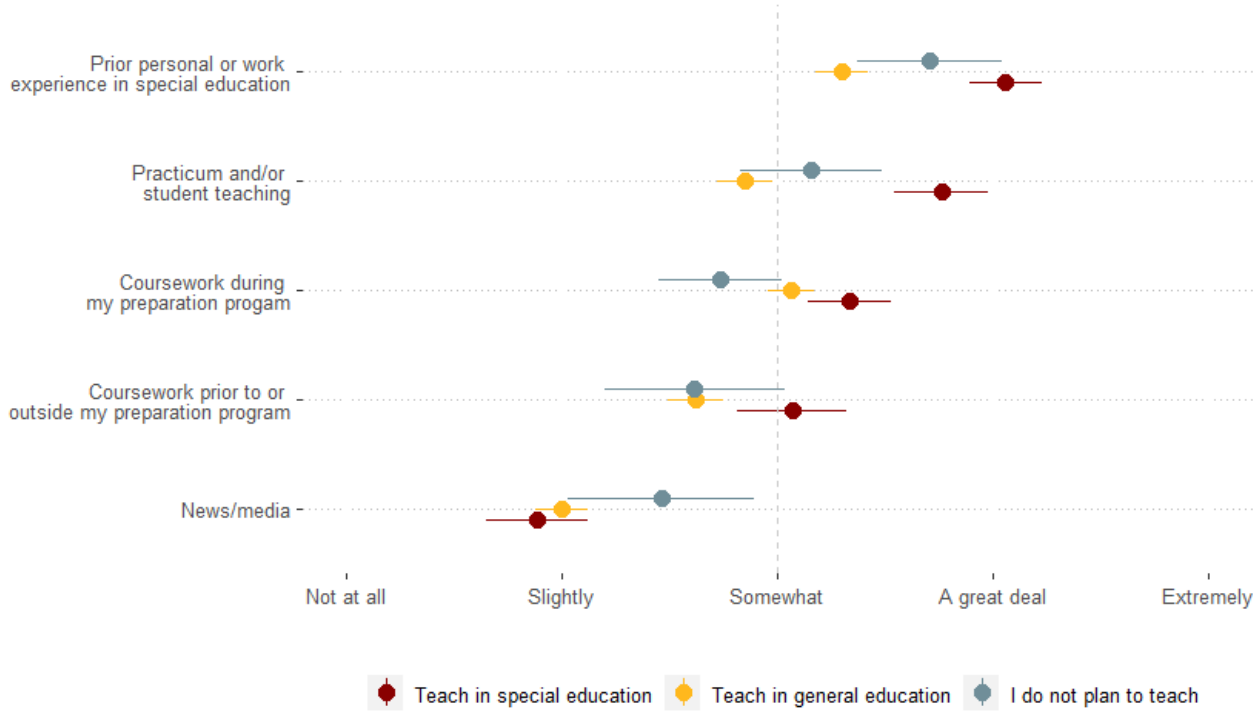
Participants were asked to rate the extent to which a range of sources (e.g., prior experience, coursework, news/media) had informed their understanding of the special education teaching profession using a 1-5 scale from "not at all" to "extremely." Figure 6 shows mean ratings of these items, grouped based on whether respondents plan to teach in general education, special education, or did not plan to teach.

Aggregating across all respondents, the information sources with the highest ratings were personal or past work experience related to special education and practicum or student teaching during a student's preparation program (both items had average ratings between "somewhat" and "a great deal"). Coursework (prior to or during a preparation program) was rated as "somewhat" informative, and news/media was rated as only "slightly" informative. The largest gap between special education and general education groups is the role of practicum and/or student teaching. Consistent with the evidence reported above that experience in a special education setting is correlated with greater *interest* in special education teaching, Figure 6 shows that those who plan to go into special education report

that direct experience in those settings is also an important source of *information* about special education. Although both groups found special education experiences informative, preservice teachers planning to become general education teachers regarded those experiences as only "somewhat" informative, while those planning to become special educators regard the experiences as contributing "a great deal" to their understanding.

Notably, those who plan to teach in special education rated every source as more informative about special education than those who plan to teach in general education, with the exception of news/media (which showed no difference). This may suggest that these items, when viewed together, indicate that those who plan to teach special education are getting more information about special education out of each of those sources than those who plan to teach in general education and those who do not plan to teach. As noted earlier, these findings should not be interpreted as causal—it may be that interest in teaching in special education leads preservice teachers to seek out more information about the profession.

Figure 6. Extent to which different sources inform understanding of the special education teaching profession, grouped based on teaching plans



Personal experiences provided perspective and understanding of the "realities" of teaching special education.

In addition to shaping their motivation as discussed earlier in this report, participants' personal experiences with special education provided a better understanding of the demands and responsibilities associated with the profession. Their personal experiences and connections to special education (e.g., experiences as family members, peers, or recipients of

special education services themselves) often offered participants an intimate view of the challenges faced by students with disabilities. For instance, an education candidate described how their personal experiences informed their understanding of teaching in special education:

> *Being a parent to a child with special needs. I wanted to be an informed parent so I studied on my own prior to going back to school. Also, participating in IEP meetings, doctor appointments, etc. informed me about what services he should be receiving and what his rights are as a student.*

At the same time, these experiences offered insight into the critical role that educators play in addressing the needs of students with disabilities. Consider these perspectives of participants who described their own experiences or those of family members and friends:

> *I think hearing experiences from my sister who works in special education has been the most informative. She gives a response that better reflects what the actual experience is compared to the ways media and other stories communicate it.*

> *Since I was in special education programs I already knew a little bit about it but working in a special education environment and taking my college courses really helps me to create deeper understandings.*

> *I have people in my life who are special education teachers or are/were pursuing that as a career and I have talked with them. They helped discuss the pitfalls of their profession, how to support all students and all the paperwork and legislature that helps support them.*

For many, observing the day-to-day interactions between special educators and students (sometimes themselves) gave them unique insights into the complexity of teaching in this field. Moreover, for many, their personal experiences generated a unique empathetic perspective for both students and teachers in special education.

Coursework and previous work experiences as a paraprofessional helped shape preservice teachers' expectations and provided insight into the role and responsibilities of special education teaching.

Numerous participants in the study cited their prior work experience and preparation program in special education as sources of information informing their decision to pursue teaching in this field. Previous experiences included having served as paraprofessionals, tutors, or assistants and completing preparation program requirements (e.g., coursework, conducting observations, and engaging in practicum placements). These experiences not only provided practical insights but also shaped participants' understanding of the unique challenges and rewards of special education.

Serving as a paraprofessional emerged as a significant source of information about the special education profession. Many participants highlighted both the hands-on nature of the experience (e.g., spending time with students with disabilities, understanding the work conditions, working with students and parents, observing instruction, teaching lessons, serving on Individualized Education Program meetings, collaborating with supervising teachers) as well as the mentoring they received as a paraprofessional from their supervising teacher(s) as valuable sources of information about special education. A participant who described their ongoing engagement in education first as a tutor and now as a paraprofessional explained the influence of this latter role:

> *As a paraprofessional I was only able to do so much for the students and I wanted to do more. I want to be able to help all students see the good with in and be able to help build the confidence in them to help them to succeed. I want to be able to see the epiphanies that happen when understanding catches up with progress. I want to be able to be more involved in the lives of the students and be able to help parents know their rights and responsibilities and be able to direct them to the resources they need for the students and their own success.*

Another participant, who works as a paraprofessional, indicated the influential role of those they work with:

> *She is the sped teacher I work with most often (I am a special ed para). She and I collaborate often and she teaches me a lot about the job. She was the one who pushed me to [a special education] license rather than just doing regular ed. Also our school social worker works really close with us and she also said that pathway gives me more marketability and chances to move throughout my career if I wanted to. They both gave me the confidence to know I could thrive if I chose the sped pathway. They also teach me and answer any question I could have about the career and what is required of you in the field.*

Another participant noted,

> *I think working with students as a paraprofessional that informed me about a lot of special education. I have the opportunity to apply what I have learned during coursework and put it into practice. This I find super valuable.*

Other participants noted that working as a paraprofessional provided motivation to pursue additional training and develop a broader skillset to support students with disabilities.

> *I am interested in pursuing special education because it became apparent to me in my first year as a paraprofessional in a Title 1 preschool that there were students with special needs who I did not have the skills to help. In addition, paraprofessionals in our district spend more time with students with disabilities than the special education teacher, but they receive no training. I felt it was important for me to have the*

knowledge I needed to help my students with disabilities, whether in a para role or in a teacher role.

Many participants mentioned the role of their preparation program experiences as an influential part of their understanding of special education. Program experiences noted by participants as informing their understanding included coursework, practicums, and mentoring. A participant, for instance, underscored the knowledge and experience of one of their instructors in serving as a source of both information and mentoring in special education.

> *My first experience was with the family members who have special needs. Watching the process to get an IEP, but also implementing the IEP in the classroom daily. Then, in my first year of college, I was in an exceptional and special needs class. My professor worked as a special education teacher in elementary schools for 15 years prior to transitioning into a college professor. Her knowledge and mentoring has helped me better understand special education teaching profession.*

For others, their understanding of the special education profession developed through having hands-on experiences from their program, including opportunities to immediately apply their learning experiences.

> *Hands on experiences and being able to use what I have learned from my coursework back to my classroom and relate them to real life experiences. It has been so nice being in the classroom while going back to school!*

> *So, I learned virtually everything I know about special education from this [university preparation] class. It was very comprehensive, as we worked through a textbook, looked at tests and worked through IEPs. It was very informative, and I enjoyed it a lot.*

Conclusions and Considerations

This study expands existing research on the teacher pipeline by exploring the influences on Utah preservice teachers' decisions to pursue either general or special education. Much of the previous research on the educator workforce has focused on barriers or deterrents (e.g., working conditions) to retention once educators enter the profession, particularly in special education. The current study however, adds an important dimension by examining the motivations, perceptions, and experiences that shape pre-service educator career intentions. As highlighted in the findings of this mixed-methods study, there are a nuanced set of factors that influence preservice teachers' interest in special education. These factors included:

- Desire to make a meaningful impact;
- Commitment to inclusion and meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities;
- Personal connections to disability or special education;
- Prior work experience in special education, particularly as a paraeducators;
- Influence of mentors and role models, including family and former teachers, and
- Understanding of the workload expectations and demands.

Those who planned to teach general education shared some of these influences, including desire to make an impact. However, they expressed a stronger desire to teach particular subjects, had less self-efficacy for teaching students with disabilities, and perceived administrative burdens as higher for special education teachers. These findings underscore the importance of intentional strategies to strengthen interest in special education.

Here we highlight three considerations that can support increasing the pipeline to special education: embed structured, high-quality field experiences and mentorship in all licensure pathways; strengthen exposure to and integration of special education across general education coursework and programs; and leverage high-impact professional experiences.

Embed structured, high-quality field experiences and mentorship to increase participation in the pathways

Formative experiences, including those that occurred prior to or apart from their formal training and preparation program, play a critical role in shaping interest in teaching in special education. This finding is similar to previous research (Brownwell et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2014), which highlights the opportunity to further integrate early and meaningful exposure to special education within all educator preparation pathways. These experiences may include career and technical education (CTE) programs in high school, peer mentoring roles, formal practicum experiences (e.g., residency and/or internship opportunities), and employment as paraeducators.

Embedding high-quality and frequent field experiences, including those with intentional mentorship from experienced special educators, can help candidates develop a clear and realistic understanding of the position of a special education teacher. These opportunities may support developing confidence and efficacy in working with special education students among potential educators, which was mentioned by some preservice teachers as obstacles to pursuing special education. Pathways that begin as early as high school through dual-credit or CTE programming can broaden access to the profession, especially for students whose access to teacher preparation opportunities may be otherwise reduced. In addition, increasing, and perhaps incentivizing, formal partnerships between districts/schools and educator preparation programs to ensure high-quality mentorship opportunities by experienced special education teachers for early-program candidates may also further influence decisions to pursue special education.

Notably, an opportunity to consider the impact of programs that enhance the pathway to teaching in Utah lies with the recent introduction of the Utah Registered Apprenticeship Program for Teachers (U-RAPT[3]). U-RAPT offers both pre-apprenticeships for those earning an associate's degree and apprenticeships for those earning a bachelor's degree and teaching license. As the program is in its initial phase, research and evaluation of this effort beginning now would be beneficial to understand how the program contributes to intended outcomes.

Strengthen exposure to and integration of special education across general education coursework and programs

Notably, coursework alone was not perceived to be as influential as other factors in the decision to pursue special education. In part, many participants, particularly those not in special education programs, indicated limited or inconsistent exposure to courses and content that developed their knowledge, understanding, and skills to support students with disabilities. This finding raises important questions about how preservice teachers are exposed to, build an awareness of, and develop the knowledge and skills necessary to support students in special education. Although many programs now require special education coursework for all teacher candidates, the extent to which general education preservice teachers are exposed to the practical realities of special education remains unclear. Moreover, current programmatic boundaries between general and special education may unintentionally reinforce silos and limit exposure rather than foster inclusive mindsets, an affinity for special education, and skills. This kind of shift may provide unique benefits to

[3] House Bill 208 (2024) led to the Utah State Board of Education establishing the Utah Registered Apprenticeship Program for Teachers (U-RAPT) in Fall 2024. https://schools.utah.gov/licensing/urapt/index

developing teacher candidates' capacity to support students with disabilities (Blanton & Pugach, 2011).

Evidence from our analysis suggests that both personal and professional experiences in special education settings are important in shaping candidates' decisions to pursue licensure in this field. More intentional integration of special education experiences into the general education preparation program curriculum could enhance candidates' understanding and appreciation of the challenges and impact of special education teaching. For example, field experiences, joint coursework, and cross-disciplinary practicum placements could clarify the special education landscape for general education candidates. A more integrated approach to educator preparation could not only support the overall pedagogical development of preservice educators but also serve to expand the special education pipeline by encouraging more preservice teachers to consider special education as a career path.

Leverage high-impact professional experiences

This study affirms that prior work in special education settings, particularly those experiences as paraprofessionals or instructional aides, is among the strongest predictors of interest in pursuing special education licensure. Preservice educators with this background described a deeper understanding of student needs, a clearer sense of their potential professional impact, and a greater commitment to inclusive education for students with disabilities. These individuals bring valuable assets to the profession, including practical knowledge and experience, professional relationships, familiarity with the day-to-day realities of the role, and a demonstrated commitment to supporting students with disabilities. Recognizing and building upon this experience through targeted recruitment and career transition supports, including expanding and incentivizing existing paraprofessional-to-teacher pathways (e.g., through tuition assistance, scheduling, mentorship supports, credit for prior service, competency-based assessments) may contribute to increasing the pipeline to special education. Furthermore, flexible licensure options such as APPEL-SPED, which is already being implemented in Utah, may support these candidates to transition more easily into full-time special education roles. This approach aligns with prior scholarship suggesting that actively engaging a "reserve pool" of experienced personnel can broaden the pipeline to special education (Billingsley & Cross, 1991).

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