Motivational profiles for choosing special education teaching as a career

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With the research reported on here we investigated the motivation of pre-service special education teachers to choose special education as major. The participants were 332 pre-service teachers from 10 universities in Chile. A latent profile analysis with 5 motivational factors of the factors influencing teaching (FIT)-choice scale was carried out to determine the motivational profiles of special education pre-service teachers. Findings show 3 profiles solution as the best model. The disenchanted profile shows low scores for all the motivational factors included in the study. A group of pre-service teachers displayed the highly engaged profile with very high motivational variables. The conventional profile had high scores in the social utility value, intrinsic value, and self-perceptions factors, although the performance in all of them was like that of the other profiles. Knowing the motivational profiles to choose a special education teaching programme can inform policies to attract and retain special education teachers in the field.

Keywords: FIT-choice scale; latent profile analysis; motivation; special education pre-service teachers

Introduction

Concerns about teacher quality and retention have highlighted the importance of initial teacher training in attracting students to the teaching profession (Eren & Yeşilbursa, 2019; Høgheim & Federici, 2022). Well-trained teachers are essential for shaping future societies, given the critical role they play in students' development (Watt, Richardson & Smith, 2017). Research links teacher quality to student learning outcomes and overall educational system performance (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ponnock, Torsney & Lombardi, 2018). This connection has led to an increase in research that consider the factors that motivate students to pursue teaching degrees (Abonyi, Awhireng & Luguterah, 2021; Eren & Tezel, 2010; Simić, Marušic-Jablanović & Purić, 2021; Taimalu, Luik, Kantelinen & Kukkonen, 2021).

This emphasis on attracting and retaining qualified teachers has become a central issue in educational policies worldwide (Ingersoll, May & Collins, 2019; Ondrasek, Carver-Thomas, Scott & Darling-Hammond, 2020). The importance of well-trained teachers is further underscored by the United Nations' (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2018). The fourth Sustainable Development Goal of the UN's 2030 Agenda specifically emphasises the need for such teachers to provide quality education for all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with disabilities (Cooc, 2019). The world is increasingly focused on ensuring that every child has access to quality education regardless of their abilities. This has led to a surge in research on special education, particularly how teachers can be better prepared for this challenging and rewarding field (Alnahdi & Schwab, 2021; Baglama & Uzunboylu, 2017; Feng, L & Sass, 2013; Li & Ruppar, 2021; Ozcan & Gur, 2016).

Research indicates that teaching students with special needs can be emotionally demanding and draining, and often lead to teacher burnout and early career dropout (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Understanding the motivation for choosing this major is, therefore, crucial from multiple perspectives. Research shows that teachers' motivation is linked to their commitment to the profession and their sense of identity as educators (García-Poyato Falcón, Cordero Arroyo & Torres Hernández, 2018). By understanding what drives people to choose special education, researchers can provide valuable insights for educational administrators seeking to recruit, retain, and support teachers. As a result effective educational policies and quality improvement programmes can be developed to support them throughout their careers (Fray & Gore, 2018; Han & Yin, 2016). While much research on teachers' motivation in general education has been done, we still do not know enough about why people choose to become special education teachers. This is a critical gap in our knowledge. By studying the factors that influence their decisions, we can improve teacher programme competition, graduation rates, recruitment, retention, and professional development programmes (Goller, Ursin, Vähäsantanen, Festner & Harteis, 2019; Sato, Fernández Castillo & Oyanedel, 2022).

Research on the factors influencing the choice of special education teaching programmes remains limited (Alnahdi, 2020; Baglama & Uzunboylu, 2017). While existing studies have explored motivation in other education fields, such as primary (Abonyi et al., 2021; Kılınç, Watt & Richardson, 2012; Said-Hung, Gratacós & Cobos, 2017) and secondary education (Glutsch & König, 2019; Silvestre, Figueroa-Gutiérrez & Díaz-Esteve, 2020; Soekamto, Utaya, Sumarmi, Handoyo & Amin, 2021), the motivations of prospective special education

teachers are understudied. With this study we aimed to investigate the interplay among intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic motivation, social influences, and self-perceptions among pre-service special education teachers.

To achieve this, two objectives were established. Firstly, we sought to identify motivational profiles among Chilean special education pre-service teachers considering factors such as intrinsic, social, and personal values, self-perception, and social influences as measured by the factors influencing teaching (FIT)-choice scale. Given the absence of prior research, an exploratory approach without specific hypotheses was adopted. As gender and sociodemographic variables exhibited homogeneity within the sample, they were not included as covariates.

Secondly, we aimed to examine the relationships among the identified motivational factors and potential differences between profiles. Building on previous research by Alnahdi (2020), and Giersch, Ydhag and Korhonen (2021), which demonstrated a strong association between social and intrinsic value, we hypothesised that social value would be prevalent across all profiles, although with variations between groups.

Theoretical Framework
Special education teaching profession
The special education teacher profession is characterised by high turnover rates because of factors such as stress, workload, limited support, and emotional demands (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Dewey, Sindelar, Bettini, Boe, Rosenberg & Leko, 2017; Scott, Taylor, Bruno, Padhye, Brendli, Wallace & Cormier, 2022). Identifying the motivation of individuals who choose special education is essential for developing effective strategies to attract and retain qualified teachers in this field. While research has highlighted the importance of empathy, patience, and vocational skills for special education teachers (Allahverdiyev, Yucesoy & Baglama, 2017; Baglama & Uzunboylu, 2017; Ozcan & Gur, 2016), there is a notable gap in understanding the underlying motivations for pursuing this career paths.

Given the rising number of students with special educational needs, understanding the motivation of special education teachers is increasingly critical. In Chile, the number of students enrolled in school integration programmes (PIE for the Spanish acronym *Programa de Integración Escolar*) has steadily increased from 333,073 in 2017 to 385,413 in 2021, representing 10.6% of the total number of students enrolled in the school system in the country (Centro de Estudios MINEDUC, 2022). Similar trends have been reported in other countries like Northern Cyprus (Baglama & Uzunboylu, 2017) and the United States of America (Scott et al., 2022). This growing demand for special education services necessitates a larger and more qualified teacher workforce.

Motivation for choosing teaching as a career
Teacher motivation significantly influences job performance, commitment, and overall career satisfaction (Han & Yin, 2016; Roness & Smith, 2010; Watt et al., 2017). Alexander, Wyatt-Smith and Du Plessis (2020) show that pre-service teachers with high intrinsic motivation show greater professional satisfaction and well-being, while Holzberger, Maurer, Kunina-Habenicht and Kunter (2021) identified distinct teacher profiles based on motivation, beliefs, and self-regulation, with highly motivated individuals demonstrating greater occupational well-being.

Much of the research on teacher motivations employed a quantitative approach, primarily using the FIT-choice model (Fray & Gore, 2018). Grounded in the expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), this model posits that motivation is influenced by both expectations (self-perceived ability) and value (personal beliefs about the importance of teaching). The FIT-choice model further distinguishes extrinsic, intrinsic, and altruistic motivation. While expectations are closely tied to the "expectancy" component of the theory, motivation aligns with the "value" component.

Although expectations play a crucial role in choosing a teaching career (Bergmark, Lundström, Manderstedt & Palo, 2018; Reeves & Lowenhaupt, 2016), extrinsic factors such as salary, job security, and societal perceptions also play a significant role, particularly in specific cultural contexts. For instance, Lindqvist, Thornberg and Lindqvist (2021) found that some Swedish teachers pursued special education to advance their career paths or to increase career opportunities rather than promote inclusive education. Similarly, Y Feng (2012) identified strong extrinsic motivation among Chinese special education teachers, including job security, career opportunities, and family financial pressures. These findings align with Wang and Zhang (2021) who found that extrinsic factors, such as income and residence status, influenced Chinese teachers' career choices.

Studies conducted in South Africa (Mwamwenda, 2010) and Türkiye (Yüce, Sahin, Koçer & Kana, 2013) also underscore the importance of extrinsic factors in career decisions. As Fray and Gore (2018) established, extrinsic factors such as work hours and job security were not prioritised over altruistic or intrinsic motivations in many Western countries. In contrast, extrinsic motivation significantly influenced career choices in some non-Western nations. This highlights the importance of considering cultural factors when studying teacher motivation. Despite these cross-cultural differences, a universal pattern explaining

why people choose teaching remains elusive (Taimalu et al., 2021).

Method
Sample and Procedures
A randomised sample of pre-service special education teachers from 10 Chilean universities was invited to participate in the study. The sample comprised 332 students enrolled in special education programmes between 2015 and 2021, with 71%

from the most recent three cohorts. Participating universities were located in the Valparaíso, Metropólitan, Biobío, and Magallanes regions. The sample was predominantly female (95.5%), and 84% (*n* = 279) of participants reported special education as their first-choice major. Additionally, 51.2% indicated having a relative involved in teaching. Descriptive statistics for the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics (The jamovi project, 2022)

	Age	Sex	Cohort	Career option	Teacher family member
N	332	332	332	332	332
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
M	21.2	1.05	2019	1.16	1.48
SD	3.00	0.247	1.40	0.36	0.50
Lower bound	18	1	2015	1/84% (279)	1/51.2% (170)
Upper bound	38	3	2021	2/15.9% (53)	2/48.7% (162)

Note. In the sex variable, we included (1) male, (2) female and (3) no binary. In other variables, (1) is yes, and (2) is no.

Data were collected online using Google Forms between April and August 2021. All students provided informed consent before participation. The consent form outlined the objectives, benefits, no-cost involvement, minimal risk, confidentially measures, and participant rights of the study. These procedures adhered to the World Conferences on Research Integrity (2024). The principal investigator managed the data, and identification codes were assigned to universities and students to protect confidentiality. The Institutional Ethics Committee approved the study (ORDN05/2021).

Instruments
FIT-choice scale
The FIT-choice scale (Watt & Richardson, 2007) is a measurement structured in three parts. The first was adapted to the Chilean context, including sociodemographic data. This section included questions about parents' educational level and average family income. The second refers to the motivational factors related to the social and personal utility value, self-perception, and social influences. The third group is the perception factors associated with the demands of teaching and the return that this career may have. The instrument has 57 items; the multiple-choice answers are arranged on a 7-point Likert scale where (1) is not important and (7) is extremely important. The reliability indexes for the sampling are obtained through the Omega coefficient and are between $\omega = .613$ and $\omega = .929$.

Data Analysis
A descriptive statistical analysis was done to answer the first research objective. Then a latent profiles analysis (LPA) was carried out with the motivation factors of the FIT-choice scale (intrinsic value, social value, personal value, self-perception, and social influences). The factor of fallback career was

excluded because it did not show reasonable adjustment and reliability indexes for the Chilean version of the scale (González-Sanzana, Valenzuela-Carreño, Cáceres-Serrano & Valdenegro-Fuentes, 2023). The adjustment index AIC (Akaike information criterion), BIC (Bayesian information criterion), entropy, and chi-square were used to select the best model (Spurk, Hirschi, Wang, Valero & Kauffeld, 2020).

A one-way ANOVA was carried out to verify the variance of the means of each of the profiles in each factor to answer the second research objective. At the same time, Tukey's post hoc test was used to compare the significant differences between the profiles (Ruxton & Beauchamp, 2008). The procedures of analysis were done using the statistics program, jamovi 2.2.5.

Results
Sociodemographic Characteristics
The sample predominantly comprised females (95.5%) who chose to study special education. Most participants originated from public schools and state-subsidised private schools. This finding aligns with research demonstrating a female predominance in the teaching profession in various countries, including Australia, Israel (Watt, Butler & Richardson, 2021), Spain (Gratacós & López-Jurado Puig, 2016), South Africa (Mashiya, 2014; Petersen, 2014), and Latin American countries (Llanes Ordóñez, Méndez-Ulrich & Montané López, 2021). The socioeconomic status (SES) of the participants in the sample was medium to low.

Interestingly, a small proportion of students were from private schools, suggesting a lower interest in special education among individuals from higher SES backgrounds. This pattern has been observed in other countries, such as Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Northern Cyprus, and various Latin American nations, where teaching is often

associated with lower socio-economic groups (Alnahdi, 2020; Baglama & Uzunboylu, 2017; Balyer & Özcan, 2014; Llanes Ordóñez et al., 2021), which is in contrasts with countries where the teaching profession attracts a more homogeneous socio-economic group (Goller et al., 2019; Taimalu et al., 2021; Watt & Richardson, 2012).

These findings highlight the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and provide context for understanding the potential motivation for choosing a special education career.

Motivational Profiles for Choosing Special Education Teaching

Four models incorporating the five motivational factors from the FIT-choice scale were tested using latent profile analysis (LPA). The specific model characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Latent Profile Analysis (model fit parameters) (The jamovi project, 2022)

Model	N	Classes	AIC	BIC	Entropy	G^2	G^2p	χ^2	$\chi^2 p$
Mod.1	332	2	4076	4309	5.99	793	1.000	2.71e+6	< .001
Mod.2	**332**	**3**	**4020**	**4370**	**5.81**	**675**	**1.000**	**3.79e+6**	**< .001**
Mod.3	332	4	4013	4481	5.68	606	1.000	2922	1.000
Mod.4	332	5	4087	4673	5.71	617	1.000	4838	1.000

Note. G^2: likelihood-ratio statistic; χ^2: Pearson chi-square adjustment index; Entropy: not normalised, range between 0 and infinity. Bold indicates the best model.

The best-fit model identified through LPA was a three-class model solution (Mod.2; AIC = 4020; BIC = 4370; Entropy = 5.81; χ^2 p < .001). The distribution of variables across these three profiles is shown in Figure 1.
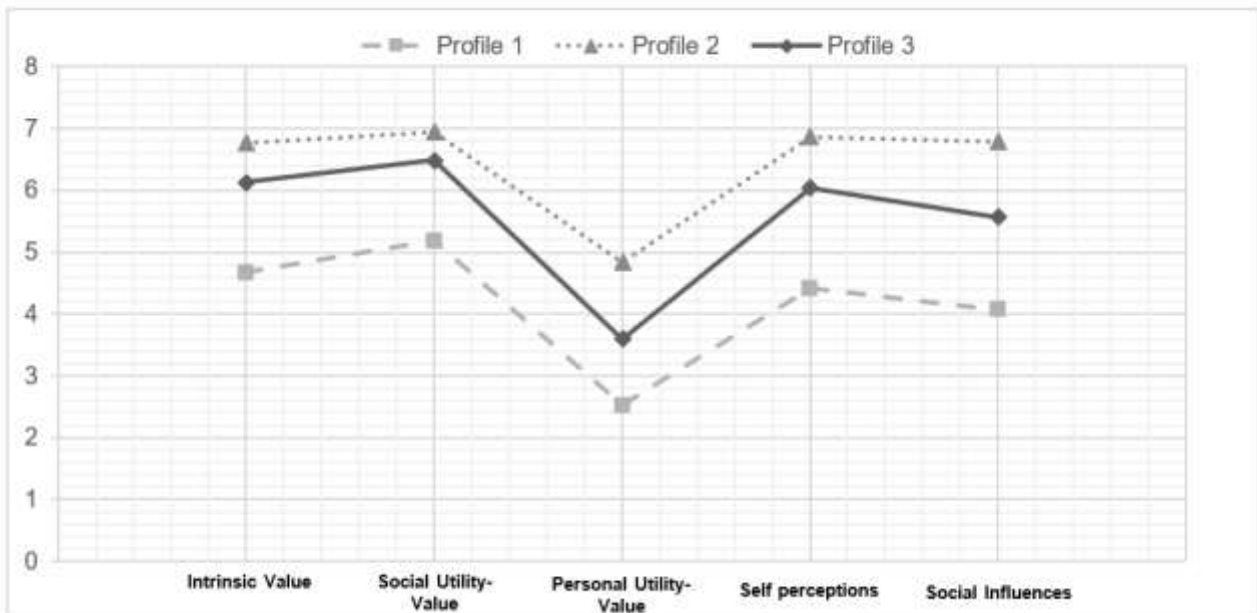

Figure 1 Profiles behaviour in each variable (The jamovi project, 2022)

Following the procedures used by other researchers (Moses, Berry, Saab & Admiraal, 2017; Simić et al., 2021; Watt, Richardson & Wilkins, 2014), the three profiles were named and characterised as follows.

The disenchanted, profile (Profile 1) accounted for 8.1 % of the sample ($n = 27$) and exhibited the lowest scores across all variables. Social utility was the least valued factor, followed by intrinsic value. Self-perception of teaching abilities were lower than the pleasure derived from teaching. Social influences, previous teaching experience, and extrinsic motivation had minimal impact on career choice.

Highly engaged (Profile 2), comprising 42.1% of the sample ($n = 140$), presented the classic teacher profile. It demonstrated strong relationships among intrinsic value, self-perception, and social value. This group exhibited the highest mean scores across all variables, with social influences and previous teaching experience playing a significant role in career choice. Extrinsic motivation was relatively low.

Conventional (Profile 3), the largest profile accounting for 49.6% of the sample ($n = 165$), emphasised altruistic and intrinsic motivation, followed by self-perception. Social influences were somewhat lower than in the highly engaged profile,

while extrinsic motivation remained the least valued factor.

Differences Among the Profiles

One-way ANOVA results indicated significant differences among the three profiles regarding all five dependent variables (intrinsic value, social value, personal utility value, self-perception, and social influences). This is indicated by the *p*-value of less than .001 for each variable. The values are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3 One-way ANOVA (The jamovi project, 2022)

	F	*df*	*df2*	*p*
Intrinsic value	83.0	2	329	< .001
Social value	86.5	2	329	< .001
Personal utility value	47.6	2	329	< .001
Self-perception	163.7	2	329	< .001
Social influences	119.9	2	329	< .001

Note. All differences are significant at $p < .001$.

Levene's test for homogeneity of variances was significant ($p < .001$), indicating unequal variances across groups. Despite this violation of the ANOVA assumption, Tukey's post-hoc test revealed significant differences ($p < .001$) between all pairs of groups for each dependent variable. The disenchanted profile consistently exhibited lower scores than both the highly engaged and conventional profiles. Conversely, the highly engaged profile demonstrated the highest scores across all variables. Detailed results of multiple comparison tests are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Tukey post hoc test (The jamovi project, 2022)

	N	\- Intrinsic value 1	Intrinsic value 2	Intrinsic value 3	Social value 1	Social value 2	Social value 3	Personal utility value 1	Personal utility value 2	Personal utility value 3	Self-perception 1	Self-perception 2	Self-perception 3	Social influences 1	Social influences 2	Social influences 3
Profile 1	27		-2.09***	-1.46***		-1.76***	-1.31***		-232***	-1.08***		-2.46***	-1.62***		-2.71***	-1.48***
Profile 2	140			0.63***			0.44***			1.25***			0.82***			1.24***
Profile 3	165															

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

We performed a Pearson's correlation to understand how these factors were related to one another. All factors were significantly correlated ($p < 0.001$), as shown in Table 5. We found a moderate positive correlation between intrinsic career value (ICV) and self-perception (SP) ($p = 0.580$). This suggests that individuals who felt confident in their abilities and regarded themselves as suited for special education were more likely to value the intrinsic rewards of the job, such as the intellectual challenge and opportunity to make a difference. We also found a moderate positive correlation between social utility value (SUV) and self-perception (SP) ($p = 0.595$). This lead to the belief that people who felt confident in their abilities, and regarded themselves as suited for special education were also more likely to value the social impact of their work, such as helping others and making a social contribution. In the case of special education teachers this is manifested in a contribution to enhance equity and access for students with special needs.

Finally, we found a weak and positive correlation between SUV and social influences (SI) ($p = 0.443$). These results show that people who are influenced by others to pursue a career in special education are also more likely to value the social contributions of their job. However, self-perception shows the strongest correlations with ICV and SUV, revealing that these are core factors in choosing special education teaching as a career.

Table 5 Correlation matrix (The jamovi project, 2022)

	ICV	SUV	PUV	SP	SI
Intrinsic career value (ICV)	—				
Social utility value (SUV)	0.522***	—			
Personal utility value (PUV)	0.186***	0.305***	—		
Self-perception (SP)	0.580***	0.595***	0.279***	—	
Social influences (SI)	0.423***	0.443***	0.496***	0.488***	—

Note. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

Discussion

The global shortage of special education teachers is a serious issue that needs attention (Balyer & Özcan, 2014; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Dewey et al., 2017). Some research notes that understanding the factors that motivate people to decide to pursue this career would allow the generation of policies of attraction and retention to help solve this problem (Abonyi et al., 2021; Han & Yin, 2016; Watt & Richardson, 2012). By examining the motivation of pre-service special education teachers, we contribute to the development of effective recruitment and retention strategies.

Based on motivational factors of the FIT-choice model we were able to identify three different profiles of pre-service special education teachers: conventional, highly engaged, and disenchanted. Low motivational levels were seen in all dimensions of the disenchanted profile, indicating a lack of interest in the field.

In contrast, the highly engaged profile demonstrated strong intrinsic and altruistic motivation aligning with other research highlighting the importance of helping others and making a difference (Ozcan & Gur, 2016; Scott, Bruno, Gnilka, Kozachuk, Brendli & Vitullo, 2021; Zhang, Wang, Losinski & Katsiyannis, 2014). Similar results were found by Alnahdi and Schwab (2021) in Saudi Arabia, where 98% of the participants considered that choosing a teaching career in special education implied working with children with disabilities, which they believed to be a gratifying and humanitarian task. Likewise, research carried out in Türkiye found that helping people with special educational needs to integrate into society was the most critical factor in choosing a special education major (Ozcan & Gur, 2016). This shows solid altruistic motivation.

The conventional profile, however, represented a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, with a strong emphasis on social utility. Unlike the highly engaged group, this profile showed high scores in the social utility value factor, intrinsic value, and self-perception. Social influences had a lower incidence than in the previous group. The high intrinsic value manifests the pleasure for these people to be involved in teaching. The high social value underlines the wish to contribute to the betterment of society and the lives of people with special educational needs. Other studies have found similar results regarding primary school teachers and high school teachers in countries as diverse as Nigeria, Finland, Germany, Australia, and Serbia (Akpochafo, 2020; Goller et al., 2019; Richardson & Watt, 2006; Simić et al., 2021). It seems that this profile represents the commonly expressed reasons for choosing teaching careers because regardless of the characteristic of the instrument to explore the motivation for pursuing a career in education, a consistent pattern points to altruistic motivation as the first reason to choose teaching as a profession (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992).

One-way ANOVA results indicate significant differences among the three profiles regarding intrinsic value, social value, personal utility, self-perception, and social influences. Pearson correlations revealed strong relationships among these factors, suggesting that they are interconnected. While the disenchanted profile was

characterised by low scores across all variables, the highly engaged profile exhibited high levels of motivation. The conventional profile shows an emphasis on intrinsic and altruistic values offering a middle ground for reasons to choose teaching in special education.

The results of this study highlight the importance of taking into account contextual and cultural aspects when analysing motivation to choose to teach. This is in contrast to other nations where the personal utility value factors (e.g. stability, development opportunities, social status of the profession, family/job time conciliation) have resulted in being the ones that attract people to this career (Abonyi et al., 2021; Alnahdi, 2020; Goller et al., 2019; Lee, Kang & Park, 2019; Mwamwenda, 2010; Salifu, Alagbela & Gyamfi Ofori, 2018). In Chile, extrinsic factors like professional development, achievement expectations, and working conditions are not relevant when choosing special education teaching programmes.

These findings have some implications for teacher education, recruitment, and retention. Understanding the motivation of pre-service teachers to choose special education teaching can provide institutions with valuable insights to develop targeted strategies to attract and retain qualified candidates. Additionally, initiatives to enhance general working conditions and the professional status of teachers can help to reduce turnover rates and boost job satisfaction.

Several suggestions are made in order to capitalise on our findings and attend to the issues that have been found. Firstly, it is important to implement strategic recruitment initiatives targeted at people who fit particular motivation profiles. Secondly, comprehensive mentorship and induction programmes can foster intrinsic motivation and support new teachers. Thirdly, competitive compensation packages, including robust benefits and professional development opportunities, are crucial for attracting and retaining qualified educators. Finally, reducing non-teaching workloads and fostering collaborative partnerships can enhance job satisfaction and create a more supportive school environment.

Furthermore, pre-service teacher education programmes should highlight the demands and rewards of special education. In this regard practical experiences such as field placements and internships, are indispensable for developing the necessary skills, knowledge and competencies to deal with everyday challenges in special education.

This multifaceted approach addresses the complex issues of special education teacher recruitment, retention, and preparation, ultimately contributing to improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

Conclusion

With this study we aimed to understand what motivated people to become special education teachers. We identified three distinct groups of future teachers: the disenchanted, the highly engaged, and the conventional. These groups differed significantly regarding their motivation, such as the value they placed on helping others, personal growth and social recognition.

Understanding the motivations is crucial for attracting and retaining talented special education teachers. For example, we could create mentorship programmes for the disenchanted group to boost their engagement, or leadership development opportunities for the highly engaged group to further their growth. Additionally, we could enhance self-perception through academic support and practical experiences to attract more qualified candidates.

It is important to note that our findings are specific to the Chilean context. Cultural and societal factors, like the social status of teachers and government policies, can influence career choices. However, our research provides valuable insights that can be applied to other countries facing similar challenges. Future research should expand the sample to include a broader population, explore the stability of the identified profiles over time, and conduct comparative studies with other countries to identify culturally specific patterns in teacher motivation. Addressing the complex interplay between individual motivation and contextual factors, future research can also contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies to strengthen the special education teaching workforce.

Authors' Contributions

LVF – conceptualisation, methodology, data analyses, writing and responding to reviewers' comments. AGS – editing, writing and formal analysis. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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