

# “You and I Will Change the World”

## *Student Teachers’ Motives for Choosing Special Education*

Rivka Hillel Lavian<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Graduate School, Levinsky College of Education, Tel Aviv, Israel

\*Correspondence: The Graduate School, Levinsky College of Education, Tel Aviv, Israel. E-mail: rivkal@zahav.net.il

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### Abstract

In the last few years we have noticed that a large number of students opt to study special education in preference to other fields in the colleges of education. The sources and implications of this phenomenon must be investigated particularly considering the proportion of pupils with special needs in the educational system. Many studies have addressed the issue of the motivation for selecting teaching in regular education but this topic has hardly been investigated in special education. Therefore, the objective of this research is to examine through life-stories what motivates students of education, including those in the academic retraining programs, to choose special education.

The research question: **What motivates student teachers to major in special education?** The research is a narrative research, which has many contributions for teaching and for education: the proximity to the agents of education by focusing on their discourses, the dismantling of barriers between the researcher and subject and the empowerment of the educators working in the field. The narrative form contributes to the professional and personal development of teachers and other educators.

The research group included 20 special education students in one of the large colleges in Israel. The research tool was the autobiography, a written life-story.

In the narrative analysis approach used here, hypotheses were based on direct descriptions and explanations provided by the narrators. Thus, a picture emerged of the subject under examination that reflected the data and the research participants' world. No theory of any kind was imposed on the data. The present research was founded on the content-based, categorical analysis model developed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashich & Zilber (1998).

The picture arising from the narratives is that of highly motivated teachers. Most of them came to special education from a very personal place, from **personal or familial difficulties**. Some of them have learning disabilities or were new immigrants. Some of them are sisters to children with special needs. This forced them to experience in the early stages of their lives a **treatment where they experienced success** either through personal responsibility or in the army. They come to teaching with the intent of changing the system, to make it better and more empathetic. Some of them come to teaching out of a desire for a corrective experience for themselves after a sense of failure in the regular system. Some of the participants indicated the influence that significant special education teachers had on them as **models of identification**.

All the participants recognized themselves as having **personal traits and abilities** which drove them to pursue this profession such as **creativity and flexibility, commitment, patience, sensitivity and empathy**. Most of the participants perceive **special education as more meaningful than regular education**, while some of them see educational studies as a step towards **studying various types of therapy**.

**Keywords:** *narratives; special education teachers; career choice*

### 1. Literature Review

The aim of this paper was to identify the factors that motivated this group of teaching students to study special education

### *1.1 Career Choice*

Choosing a career is one of the most significant decisions of an individual's life, and it constitutes an ongoing developmental process involving many stages and variables. The decision of what profession to pursue is made based on a constellation of external and internal factors (Avishar, 2003). Career choice theorists focus on two major aspects in the decision process: personality characteristics and developmental considerations.

Anne Roe (1957, in Nagar, 2001) was one of the first to develop a theory explaining career choice using terms from the field of personality. According to Roe, an individual's set of needs and preferences is related to his or her choice of career. This choice develops as a result of familial and environmental influences that interact with genetic factors. In her research, Roe found that parental attitude toward the child and childhood experiences are significant factors in determining the inner needs affecting an individual's orientation to the world, including choice of profession.

Beginning in the 1970s, theorists began to claim that work is not only a means of ensuring subsistence, but rather forms an individual's identity and singularity, facilitates individual expression, and meets the need for self-fulfillment through work and achievement. Work is what determines an individual's social status and often his relations with others as well (Klingman, 1973). Klingman points to **three major approaches** that attempt to answer why an individual tends to select a particular profession.

**General training approach:** This approach is consistent with developmental psychology, which claims that every individual is born with certain characteristics, talents and tendencies, and that human beings are adaptive creatures. The assumption is that an individual has the potential to be as successful in other professions as in his chosen profession. Human beings are developing creatures and are capable of change, so that it is reasonable to assume that some will change careers or advance professionally at some point in their lives as a result of developmental experiences and incidents. One example is a teacher who becomes an educational counselor and later a principal. This approach stresses that career choice is a process that begins before the decision is made and comes to fruition during the developmental process.

**Opportunities approach:** This approach conforms to the behavioral approach to decision-making. Career choice is the result of a combination of random variables that the individual has practically no control over. As such, for an individual to select a particular career, he must be in the right place at the right time.

**Professional specialization approach:** This approach conforms to analytic psychology. Specific professions require a particular type of individual who has certain individual qualities and a high degree of expertise in the skills required by the profession. That is, what directs an individual to choose one profession or another is his familiarity with the demands of many different professions from the perspectives of individual qualities and expertise. At times an individual may incorrectly assess these variables, or a situation may arise in which there is no longer a need for the profession in which the individual was trained, thus leading to disappointment and frustration.

Yafe-Yanai (2000) claims the human desire for meaningful work is an existential need. Individuals choose a profession or a career to fulfill themselves and to shape their professional identity. A strong self-identity is a necessary condition for professional self-fulfillment.

Individuals are motivated by the key personalities in their lives and the cultural values of the society in which they live. They are also directed by inner factors such as tendencies, needs, interests, ambitions, values, and approaches and patterns of relating to others. Other contributing factors are age, sex, intellectual level, talents and temperament. These factors affect the entire process of individual development with respect to studies and career, as well as any changes in direction, including career change.

According to Jung, the need for career change becomes particularly prevalent in periods of mid-life crisis. Jung claims that it is impossible for individuals to reach their peak of growth at age 20 for only at age 40 do individuals fulfill themselves. Lack of progress and the concomitant dissatisfaction propel individuals to reevaluate their relations with their surroundings, their families and their careers, to set up new priorities, or to strengthen existing ones (Jung in Avishar, 2003).

### *1.2 Choice of Teaching Profession*

Studies have shown that choosing the teaching profession and developing a career as a teacher are primarily influenced by internal or external motivations. Internal motivations include altruism or the desire to help children and contribute to society, the desire for interpersonal contact at work and continued education. In contrast, one of the external motivations, particularly among women, is the convenient work hours that enable women to fulfill their other roles as mothers and wives (Pines Malach, 2011, Hillel Lavian, 2003).

It appears that this choice of profession is also linked to feminist research in education. Peri (2002) divided the reasons women choose the teaching profession into three categories:

"Traditional" women see teaching as a branch of housework. These women believe it is their mission to be daughters, wives, and mothers.

"Successful" career women see their work as making a contribution to the family equal to that of their spouses. They believe in equally sharing the household chores with their spouses.

Women who are "in transition" do not necessarily want to be teachers. Their reasons for becoming teachers were practical, for this profession enabled them to work in a convenient job while raising their families.

Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant (2003) examined the motives of education students who were undergoing career retraining. Their findings revealed motives related to a variety of factors: disappointment in their previous job setting (boredom and loneliness), the need for security and stability, changes in their views on life, memories of school and of exceptional teachers, and the desire to make use of special professional knowledge. Moreover, other motivations attracting them to teaching also emerged: practical work combined with academic studies, satisfaction and making a contribution to others, a sense of personal growth, and the ability to empower others. Teaching facilitates development and provides the autonomy to initiate, learn and implement new ideas. It offers opportunities for devoting personal female energy toward emotional, intellectual and psychological growth and development. This energy is reciprocal, leading to empowering the self and others.

### *1.3 Choosing a Career in Special Education*

The literature on choosing the teaching profession is based on extensive research in the field. In contrast, very few researchers are engaged in examining special education teaching as a career choice.

In a study of people in the service professions, Pines and Aronson (1988) found that love of humanity and certain personal characteristics are what motivated people to choose their profession. In addition to their shared humanitarian motives, people in the service professions were found to have personal motives such as being inspired by a particular individual or influenced by some past incident.

Margaret et al. (2007) examined why teachers work with weak population groups. They found that the desire to work with these groups is positively correlated with personal experiences of family problems. People tend to choose a particular profession that coincides with their values and personal motivation.

In examining students and teachers with learning difficulties, Vogel (1998) found that a significant number of these students chose to major in special education. Indeed, in the United States, one quarter of the students with learning disabilities pursued a degree in education, and half of these chose to major in special education (Wertheim et al., 2004). Adelman and Vogel (1993) describe cases of students with dyslexia who reported on positive experiences in school and remembered teachers who helped them and believed in their abilities despite their failures. These teachers served as role models, and the students chose special education because they felt they had unique knowledge in this field.

Hausstatter (2007) conducted a study in Norway on the motives for choosing special education as a profession. The study included a personal questionnaire filled out by 50 students majoring in special education. After that, personal interviews were conducted with 12 of the participants. The researcher found that the students could be divided into two groups. She referred to those in the first group as the "helpers" as their primary reason for choosing to major in special education was to help people with learning disabilities. Those in the second group she referred to as the "career women" for they chose to major in special education out of a belief that it would advance their professional careers.

The study by Gavish and Friedman (2001) provides an appropriate summary of this topic. The study's findings show that special education teachers made their career choice from internal motives, based on a conscious decision developed over the course of a lifetime to dedicate themselves to an emotionally demanding profession that requires helping society's weakest and most vulnerable on a daily basis. In the literature, special education teachers are described as having the following attributes: a great deal of commitment, creativity, flexibility, investigative skills, ability to cope with the unexpected, patience with slow progress or even regression, tolerance, sensitivity and empathy for those who are different, desire to give of themselves, willingness to see their work as a challenge and a calling, and being willing and able to invest emotional, physical and intellectual resources in difficult and complex work.

### *1.4 Research Question*

This study attempts to determine **what motivates student teachers to major in special education?** based upon their own personal testimony.

## **2. Research Methodology**

The qualitative paradigm presents social reality as a product of interpretive processes that are influenced by private and personal constructs. This study reveals the meanings assigned to reality and the interpretations of these meanings by the study participants themselves and by the researcher. The interpretations are subjective and are provided either consciously or unwittingly by the participants.

Narrative research based on life stories was chosen for this study from a wide range of alternative methods of interpretive research because it has achieved impressive results in recent years. No longer concerned with only past developments it also serves as a generative as well as expressive tool. Not only do narratives reflect identity, society, and culture, but the way they structure these factors establishes a connection between the researcher and the participant. The words used in narrative research are the basis for the data and the research focus moves from the universal, which can be classified and generalized, to the local and private, the personal and subjective (Clandinin, 2007; Freeman, 2007).

A narrative is a story which an individual tells about the events of his life and includes the perceptions, beliefs, and feelings through which his identity is revealed. A narrative is a live snapshot of the teller's identity or personality (De Fina, Shifrin, & Bamberg, 2007). It helps us to understand how identity develops and changes, and how these changes shift and alter direction during the course of a lifetime. It is a tool that reveals the tensions between the private person and the environment and society in which he lives. In the narrative, the individual forges his story in his own unique voice and from his own particular perspective with regard to everything around him (Baddeley & Singer, 2007).

In the last years, research in the field of education has undergone many changes, including narrative research which has become a highly respected tool in teaching and teacher education research. Narrative research allows for dealing with the many contradictions in teaching and a holistic examination of educational activity and the work of the teacher (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002). The formation of the developing professional identity can be examined through the life stories of students, where they describe their experiences and the significance they ascribe to them. Every person has a narrative that reflects his/her identity which is inseparable from his/her life story. The narrative approach has two basic considerations in favor of using the story as a research tool in education and work with teachers: the first is that teachers express important views of their work through stories; they find it helpful to use stories to describe their work and present themselves. Their stories clarify their acquired practical knowledge and understanding. The second factor is that the story is a conceptual tool through which it is possible to explain teaching and thus it appears that in order to understand teaching, one must listen to the words of teachers as they are spoken. The tale elucidates the knowhow resulting from practice and uncovers the significance that teachers find in their work (Court, Merav, Ornan, 2009; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002).

Choosing the teaching profession is strongly linked to the personal past, present and future lives of teachers, and gives the life story a relevance beyond fact and becomes a significance in the development of the identity of the person because it reflects the practicality of teachers and provides a mirror for teacher trainers of the process of education (Forrest, Keener and Harkins, 2010). The information gathered from narrative research forms the basis of the process by which students teachers make decisions with regard to their role in the class. It appears that the life stories of student-teachers can be a tool with which to examine their understanding and beliefs as well as the motivation which led them to choose teaching as a profession.

### *2.1 Research Population*

The research population was made up of 20 students of special education, half of whom are young people experiencing academia for the first time, studying for their undergraduate degree and teaching certificate in special education. The other half consists of students who have previously completed undergraduate or graduate studies and return to college in order to retrain as teachers. All were in the last year of their studies.

### *2.2 Research Tool and Research Design*

Autobiography was used as the research tool. Each of us has an internal narrative that constitutes our identity (Eakin, 2004). Through personal stories, writers express their perspectives and experiences and confirm and analyze their work (Williams, 2006). Autobiography is in effect a dialogue between writers and the details of their life that emerge

gradually from the stories they tell. Autobiography enables us to construct our lives, with autobiographic memories comprising the writer's identity and personality (Eakin, 2004).

By recalling memories and reliving personal experiences from their schooldays, whether positive or negative, teachers are able to draw closer to the emotional world of their pupils and improve their ability to understand them. Furthermore, the autobiographic act may help teachers understand the connection between their attitude to certain aspects of their childhood and their attitude to their pupils. The assumption is that teachers' behavioral patterns in relating to their pupils are in some way reflections of their childhood experiences and unconscious attempts to use their current role as teacher to resolve conflicts and "settle" old and forgotten accounts with regard to their relations with their teachers. The objective here is for these unconscious yet nearly conscious mental processes related to choosing the teaching profession and working as a teacher to be brought to consciousness and analyzed (Koboby, 1992).

Data was collected in two ways: open in-depth interviews with the students, and written autobiographies of the students, as requested by the interviewer.

I chose to analyze only the written stories and not the interviews to ensure uniformity in data collection. I read the stories a number of times found a number of recurring themes, then I analyzed each story according to these themes which I divided into categories. Once this was done there appeared to be no need for additional data. My objective was to hear the authentic story of the participants and not to satisfy my desires as a researcher (Shkedi, 2003).

### 2.3 Ethics

All the research participants knew the objective of the research and participated willingly. Their personal details have been suppressed or changed to prevent the possibility of identification.

### 2.4 An Approach Anchored in Narratives as the Basis for Analysis

In the narrative analysis approach used here, hypotheses were based on direct descriptions and explanations provided by the narrators. Thus, a picture initially emerged of the subject under examination that reflected the data and the research participants' world. No theory of any kind was imposed on the data. The present research was founded on the content-based, categorical analysis model developed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashich & Zilber (1998).

The first stage established the contents of the categories after reading the interviews in as open and unbiased a manner as possible and defining the main themes. The second stage involved classifying and formulating the themes according to categories. The findings are presented in the narrator-participants' language and describe the narrator's own experiences, feelings and viewpoint. This enabled a comprehensive and multifaceted picture of reality, as perceived by the study participants, to be obtained.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Set of Categories Emerging from Story Analyses

#### **Personal biography:**

Individual differences

Family differences

#### **Reasons for career choice:**

Success in taking care of others before becoming a teacher

Seeing special education as more meaningful than regular education

Characteristics, personality attributes and abilities

Role models

Desire for continued study in a therapeutic field

### 3.2 Personal Biography

The analysis of the set of categories shows that the categories of "personal biography" and "reasons for career choice" constitute the core groupings and provide the information necessary to answer the research question. Statements and criteria from the "personal biography" and the "reasons for career choice" categories are related. .

The interviews reveal the following motives for choosing a career in special education: individual or family

differences, influence of role models, success in caring for others before becoming a teacher, seeing special education as more meaningful than regular education and personal characteristics and abilities. Nevertheless, the various motives differ in strength and in frequency, as perceived by the participants.

The factor of **individual or family differences (siblings or parents)** was the strongest and most prevalent finding. This emerged in the autobiographies of most of the participants as a motivating factor for choosing special education.

### 3.2.1 Individual Differences

Gili considered her test anxiety as something that made her different. She was lucky enough to overcome it, and she expressed interest in studying it in more depth:

*There for the first time I discovered I had test anxiety. The school counselor advised me to pick this topic for my final project, and in fact I received corroboration from researching the topic... (Gili).*

Rakefet described the loneliness and social ostracism she experienced as a child in a youth village, which led to sleep and eating disorders but also shaped who she is today:

*The first time I met new children at the youth village, I had to reconstruct my social status. During the first few months of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I learned for the first time in my life how it felt to be unpopular. I was very miserable [...] Looking back, that time I spent on the other side of the divide feeling rejected by the other kids made a major contribution to my ability to feel empathy for children who are different. True, I didn't have any physical or mental disabilities, but I can understand and identify with children who feel like 'outsiders' for any reason [...] For the most part, I turned my unconscious anger inward, leading me to develop problems sleeping and eating ... (Rakefet).*

Leah discusses how different she felt as a new immigrant among the children:

*Our absorption was not easy. I had no language, and I behaved and dressed differently. I felt different... (Leah).*

Dorit felt she was a lone wolf that no one could include.

*On the outside, I was a stubborn and opinionated child with an overdeveloped sense of justice and fairness. I wasn't exactly an easy child and insisted on pursuing matters to the end. I was highly sensitive and looked at things quite realistically. Perhaps I felt or suspected that my parents were not strong enough. I was always supervising, defending and guarding everyone else, and I never let on that I had difficulties of my own. I felt there was no one who could include me and give legitimization to my feelings, needs or desires. I have always felt like a lone wolf... (Dorit).*

Sigalit also felt different, at first as a new immigrant unable to understand the language and later because of being in a religious educational setting though her family was secular. She also described her vision problems that caused her to be the object of ridicule, as well as the problems she experienced because she was labeled as "gifted":

*My mother was born in Belgium, and my maternal grandparents had lived there for many years, so at home we spoke mainly French. When I went to preschool at age 2, I didn't understand what everyone else was saying, and the other children and the teacher didn't understand me [...] I went to a religious pre-kindergarten and kindergarten that was close to our house. Almost all of the children were from religiously observant families, and every Friday they would talk to the teacher about Sabbath customs, while my parents used to take my brother and me for hikes every Saturday. I understood I couldn't mention this out loud [...] When I was 3 years old, I was diagnosed with an eye disease, and I had several operations. I remember this period as being particularly difficult. I underwent different treatments over the next few years, and I had to constantly put drops in my eyes to make sure the disease did not return. Even though the other children were used to seeing me like that, they still would tease me from time to time [...] In 2<sup>nd</sup> grade all the pupils were tested, and I was found to be gifted. From then on I attended special classes for gifted children run by Dr. Erica Landau [...] Every Sunday when I came to school, I was greeted by all the kids in my class, in my grade and in the whole school. They garbled the word for gifted ("mehunenet"), calling me a nerd ("hanunit"). I was deeply hurt by this and felt different from everyone else... (Sigalit)*

Liat paints a picture of social ostracism leading to her choice of special education teaching:

*I had social problems due to health issues. Several boys in my class abused me emotionally. Both my eardrums were torn, causing me hearing problems. Some of the pupils in the class (who I cannot forget even today) would humiliate me at recess, refuse to sit next to me, and other things as well. For example,*

*on my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, I invited everyone in the class to a party at my house. I passed out personal invitations at recess. When I gave the invitations to those boys who were always humiliating me, they took the invitations from me, tore them up and said, 'Who wants to come to your party? You have snot coming out of your ears. Probably everyone in your family has snot coming out of their ears.' I was so humiliated I started to cry and ran away from the class. Today, after the course, I think that this humiliation was one of the reasons I decided to study special education ... because I was different (Liat)*

As an adult, Noa was diagnosed with learning disabilities, which explained many things that had happened to her as a child:

*The Hadassah Institute recommended that I be tested for learning disabilities because of the discrepancies they saw in my tests. They also suggested a number of occupations for me, and not surprisingly one was special education teaching. After discovering that I too have learning disabilities, I was able to understand the difficulties I had in elementary school, high school and even in my higher education studies for a technical degree. On the other hand, I felt very bad, as if I was wearing a 'learning disabilities' label... (Noa).*

Throughout her childhood, Liat felt as if she did not belong. Her teachers never helped her and even made her feel worse:

*I was a very sensitive and bashful child. I almost never spoke with adults. As a result, I didn't feel I belonged at the prestigious school I attended" (Limor).*

*Not much changed for me in high school. The same fears and suspicions only became more entrenched. From my point of view, the teachers were even more difficult, annoying and cruel. They didn't respect me, nor I them. They didn't believe in me and I didn't believe in myself. I kept all these offensive insults and stings inside me, and there were plenty (Limor).*

Sivan tells a heartrending story of difficulties she experienced because of an undiagnosed learning difficulty. Her parents, and particularly her father, did not accept her:

*My problems began to emerge when I started school. From the outset I y had trouble with my studies. I remember myself as a weak student, in fact very weak. Failure followed failure. My father insisted on telling me over and over that when a tree bends, it can't be straightened again. He would say things like, 'You're like the tree. You are already bent, and you can't be straightened.' That tree followed me during my entire school career, and perhaps it's still with me, though in a different form. [...] Even though I never spoke with my father, after around a week he told me that they think I'm retarded or dyslexic and that they want to have me tested. Back then the word 'dyslexic' was just another way of saying 'retarded'. At that time people were not aware of learning disabilities... (Sivan).*

### 3.2.2 Family Differences: Parents/Siblings/Children

Tal's father lived in the shadow of the Holocaust, and she witnessed his nightmares, though he never told his family about his troubles:

*As a Holocaust survivor who survived the camp and lost practically his entire family, my father was very anxious about us and he wanted us near him as much as possible [...] at night my father would yell in his sleep, remembering the terrible sights and experiences he had endured. But he said almost nothing about the Holocaust. Right before he died, he told us a bit, though very little (Tal).*

Rakefet was less than a year old when her father was killed in war:

*When I was 11 months old, the Yom Kippur War broke out, and my father was called up to his squadron. That same morning he was killed when his plane was shot down on the Golan Heights. I grew up in the kibbutz children's house. I saw my mother only around four hours a day, from 4:00 to 8:00 p.m. (Rakefet).*

Ayala interrupted her special education studies because she went into early labor, giving birth to a baby with problems. She went back to school as part of her attempt to cope with what happened.

*After giving birth prematurely, I stopped doing everything I had been doing at the time. I don't know if the condition of my baby is what drew me back to studying special education or if it was my desire to do something that would make me feels fulfilled and challenged rather than depressed (Ayala).*

Sarah's sister was placed in a special education setting, and Sarah blamed herself:

*When I was 5 and was supposed to go to first grade with my sister, the kindergarten teacher recommended*

*that she be tested, and she was sent to a special kindergarten class [...] my sister's cognitive development stopped around age 14, and she continued to act like an adolescent. I found this hard to cope with. The sister I had waited for hadn't turned out the way I wanted. I felt I had missed something, that this was some sort of failure on my part (Sarah).*

Among the reported differences in the family were growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust, the death of a parent and having siblings and children with special needs. Individual differences emerged in a variety of difficulties, such as test anxiety, learning difficulties, social isolation and ostracism, medical problems and immigration.

### 3.3 Reasons for Choosing the Profession

#### 3.3.1 Success in Taking Care of Others before Becoming a Teacher

Another prominent finding was success in taking care of others before becoming a teacher. More than half the participants told about a successful case of caring for someone else before they began studying to be teachers.

As the daughter of a preschool teacher, Gili spent hours in the preschool:

*After I was discharged from the army, I helped my mother, who was a preschool teacher of young children. I became a member of the staff and acquired appropriate skills... As a young girl, I helped my mother however I could in the preschool... (Gili).*

Rakefet helped a friend whose son had PDD. She enjoyed the feeling of giving of herself and the sense of being needed:

*After a few months, a good friend of mine told me her two-and-a-half-year-old son had been diagnosed with PDD. She asked me whether I was interested in working with him in the mornings in a regular preschool as an aide. I don't know what was more attractive to me about her offer – my feelings for my friend and my strong sense of identification with her situation (she of course was in a terrible crisis), or my inner attraction to the field of special education. The boy became very attached to me, and I felt good about helping him and his family [...] I worked with an amazing woman in the 'Tsa'ad Kadima' (A Step Forward) organization. She herself had a child with CP. I began noticing that giving to others who are in need makes me feel good and happy inside... (Rakefet).*

Leah served as a “teacher” for her immigrant parents:

*In addition to all their other difficulties, my parents also had a lot of trouble reading Hebrew. My father was 46 and my mother was 34 when they came here. Because of their difficulties, I acted as their 'tutor'. It was very important for me as a child that they become absorbed and use Hebrew... (Leah).*

In the army, Shani worked as a counselor. She also took care of her younger siblings:

*For part of my army service I worked as a counselor. This work bolstered my desire to work in this field. From the age of 8, I took care of and actually raised my three siblings from my father's second marriage. Everything seemed to come naturally to me... (Shani).*

Sigalit helped children who were having trouble in school, and she was moved by her success.

*In 8<sup>th</sup> grade I was asked to help children who were having trouble in school. I really enjoyed the fact that I was able to explain the material to them and help them with their homework [...] In my third year of teaching in the Hila remedial education program, I tutored a boy who was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade at a vocational school and had no intention of sitting for the matriculation exams. Because of the many problems he had at home, he would spend hours at my house, where I set up a spot for him to study. The rest of my family also pitched in to help, and my siblings did whatever they could. At the end of the year, he sat for the matriculation exams and passed them all. Years later when I ran into him by chance, he told me he had just been discharged from the army (when I first met him, he had no intentions of serving in the army). He also told me he was now enrolled in pre-academic studies, and that I had a lot to do with where he is today. I was very moved by our meeting, and I began to understand that I have the ability to change things for other people... (Sigalit).*

Shira studied to be a teacher in a regular classroom, but during her student teaching period she was drawn to children with special needs:

*I carried out my teaching practice in regular classes at several schools where children with attention deficit problems and hyperactivity were mainstreamed into the regular classroom. I worked closely with these pupils and felt drawn to them, and I adapted the educational materials to them. These children won*

*my heart, and I knew that in the future I would work with such children in special education settings. So when I completed my degree, I signed up for professional retraining in special education...* (Shira).

Ravit gained fulfillment from helping children with their schoolwork:

*When I was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I tutored a girl in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She had failed six subjects, and I would explain the material to her. At the end of the year, her report card was much improved, with no failing grades. I derived a great deal of satisfaction from being able to help her[...] I worked as an au pair for two children. Their parents were in business and were not at home very much. One of the children had behavioral problems. I developed a good relationship with him. Even his mother said that since I arrived on the scene his behavior improved. He was less violent at school and he did his homework...* (Ravit).

While Liat was studying for her bachelor's degree, she worked in the Perach Tutorial Project. Her success in tutoring a girl with special needs led to her decision to make a change in her career:

*During my studies, I was a tutor in the Perach Tutorial Project for two years. In the first year, I tutored a girl in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade who was having trouble with her studies. In the second year, I tutored a lovely girl in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade who had a cleft lip and emotional and social problems. It was an amazing year for me. I helped her improve in school and socially as well. It was very hard for me to say goodbye to her... I was very moved when the Perach coordinator awarded me a certificate of excellence that year. Today I understand that my experiences in my second year as a Perach tutor led me to think twice about my career choice and to switch to special education...* (Liat).

In accordance with the second approach, the participants were indeed in the right place at the right time. They experienced success and a sense of accomplishment, leading them to make their decision.

As noted, the third approach claims that individuals sometimes do not correctly assess their own qualities and expertise, and sometimes a profession becomes redundant, thus leading to disappointment and frustration. Most of the participants were already teachers specializing in different fields who decided on a career change to special education.

### 3.3.2 Seeing Special Education as More Meaningful than Regular Education

Around half of the participants reported that they consider special education to be more meaningful than regular education. The participants were in complete agreement that if one chooses to be a teacher, then special education is a more appropriate and meaningful choice.

Tal wants to contribute to those who need her most:

*I asked myself whether teaching science is my calling in life or whether there is some other way to help children more. The answer was clear, so during my sabbatical I began studying special education, a field in which I can give more to children who need more...* (Tal).

Ayala sees special education as a challenge:

*... It was a challenge for me to keep them interested during the last lesson of the day, or to put it more bluntly, for me to survive 45 minutes with them and even enjoy myself. At that time I knew nothing about Ritalin or that its effects wore off towards the end of the day! That year I pondered over what to study the following year, and I think that class was what led me to choose special education...* (Ayala).

Leah believes she is fixing something within herself and also helping those around her:

*I'm happy I chose this profession, and it will always be part of me. I believe that all those who choose special education are trying to fix something inside as well as contribute to others, to use their personalities and ability to make contact with these children and with people in general, young and old, wherever they may be, to help others move forward with warmth, empathy and love...* (Leah).

Shani recognizes the therapeutic side of special education, which is missing in the regular classroom:

*I felt that in regular education the connection to the pupils is more superficial and less in-depth than in special education, where the therapeutic side is more meaningful[...] I learned that in special education more emphasis is placed on treating the pupils. You need to be attentive to the particular needs of each and every pupil. Every child lives in his own special world, and as a special education teacher I need to adapt myself to each child and become part of this world. In my view, the child is at the center of our work. I felt that working in small groups facilitated more personal contact and attention, and perhaps even more in-depth learning in a setting where the material can be internalized and even implemented...* (Shani).

Dorit feels fulfilled:

*Today I feel I made the right decision. Perhaps not consciously and certainly not based on considerations of benefit (salary, convenience), but certainly I believe that in my own way I am coming close to the true essence of my being, and I believe that when you do something out of love and a sense of fulfillment, that is the greatest success of all... (Dorit).*

Shira feels as if she is one of the children and therefore has special feelings towards them:

*I am happy that I chose special education, which has enabled me to fulfill my aspirations of becoming a special education teacher. I have special feelings towards these children and I feel as if I am one of them... (Shira).*

Ravit came from a regular classroom and fell in love with children with Down syndrome:

*For two years I taught archeology and Bible studies, until the project came to an end. To supplement my salary I worked one afternoon a week at the Kfar Nahman Educational Institute in Raanana through a company then called Science and Art. This is a residential center for mentally retarded adults, and to tell you the truth at first I found their unusual appearance difficult to look at. But as soon as I began teaching them, I began enjoying myself. I particularly liked the people with Down syndrome. They were warm and pleasant, and I enjoyed teaching them [...] I helped a boy with learning disabilities who was failing all subjects. Today I know that he was dyslectic and dysgraphic. I remember how happy I felt to be able to help him progress, and that's when I began thinking about studying special education... (Ravit).*

Sivan traveled to India with her father's proverb about the crooked tree always in mind. An experience there made her decide that special education would be meaningful for her:

*We wandered down a filthy and noisy street in India. All of a sudden a small girl emerged between the cars and came toward us. She was around two years old and as naked as the day she was born. Her hair was wild and unruly. She bent down and kissed my feet, begging for charity. Looking at this girl made me very sad. I thought to myself that if she had been born somewhere else and in different socioeconomic conditions she would be able to grow and develop. I stood there feeling confused and helpless, as if my hands were tied and I had no way whatsoever to help her. She was truly a crooked tree through no fault of her own, and there was no way to straighten her out. I thought about how in Israel as well there are quite a few such trees. That same day when we went back to our room, I told Ayal that I wanted to study special education... (Sivan).*

### 3.3.3 Characteristics, Personality Attributes and Abilities

All the interviewees described personal characteristics and abilities that attracted them to this profession:

Gili felt highly motivated and capable of helping:

*I felt I had the appropriate personality for this field – a combination of lots of motivation, personal warmth, and the ability to help others. I draw my strength from my love for people as they are, as human beings... (Gili).*

Rakefet felt drawn to the helplessness of others:

*"I am most drawn to the feeling of helplessness, a feeling I assume I also felt as an infant... I have similar feelings for children in special education, because they often feel helpless about what is happening to them, and they desperately need an adult who can control their pain..." (Rakefet).*

For Sarah, love of humanity and accepting those who are different are primary values:

*I know that much of my personality is built upon values of loving humanity and accepting those who are different. I was taught this at home. As Jews, my parents were the victims of racism from the Nazis and their collaborators, so it was very important for them to teach us to respect others without regard for race, language, sex, etc... (Sarah).*

Shani sees herself as patient:

*For as long as I can remember, I've always loved children, and people have often told me that I have a way with children. I am very patient and I enjoy every moment with them... (Shani).*

Ravit is empathetic toward those who have trouble with their schoolwork:

*When I started high school, I was already a good 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>*

*grades. That's why I feel empathy towards children who have trouble in school. I understand how they feel and I know they require patient and gentle treatment. No way should they be hurt or insulted because in any case their self-confidence is low... (Ravit).*

Limor wants to treat others differently than she was treated as a child:

*Eventually I realized that all my bad experiences at school and my negative interactions with teachers served to enhance my own feelings of caring for and giving to others... (Limor).*

### 3.3.4 Role Models

Among a fifth of the interviewees, role models were found to be a leading motive in their choice of profession. One of the participants mentioned her grandfather as a role model. Another whose mother was a nurse felt that working in a helping profession was an inherited trait. The other participants pointed to teachers who served as role models.

Tal remembers her homeroom teachers from 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades as role models:

*I wasn't a particularly diligent pupil. In fact I was quite lazy. I have good memories of only one teacher who taught me in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. In retrospect I understand that she treated me with respect, without regard for the fact that my parents were laborers and not farmers (in the kibbutz H.L)[...] In junior high and later in high school I encountered teachers of a different type. They were more attentive to the students' needs, more encouraging and enabling. I particularly remember Nurit, my 7<sup>th</sup> grade literature teacher. That year my homeroom teacher also was involved in guiding school trips so he was often away from school. Nurit was very concerned about us and stepped in for the homeroom teacher even though she was not asked to do so. She did this of her own free will when she saw how much we needed time with the homeroom teacher... (Tal).*

Rakefet sees how similar she is to her mother:

*I assume that when my friend asked me to work with her son, the time was right for me to begin recognizing my helping tendencies, which I apparently inherited from my mother, who is a nurse. I find my similarity to my mother in my choice of direction in life quite amusing. I guess it's impossible to escape your genes. I've always said that I would never be a nurse because I am nothing like her, but ultimately I chose a helping profession as well. I didn't choose to take care of patients, but I certainly have chosen to take care of others, whether animals or children in special education... (Rakefet).*

### 3.3.5 Desire for Continued Study in Therapeutic Field

Some of the participants consider studies in a therapeutic field as a means for personal and professional development in special education.

Rakefet, Sigalit and Noa want to study animal-assisted therapy:

*The reason I came here to study is more connected to animal-assisted therapy than to special education. ... I have developed a great love for animals, and I looked for some profession or occupation that would enable me to work with animals. ... (Rakefet).*

*I signed up for retraining in special education and also to study for a certificate in animal-assisted therapy, a field that is very close to my heart... (Sigalit).*

*Based on recommendations from the Institute, I decided to look into studying special education ... By chance I discovered animal-assisted therapy in a book put out by the Discharged Soldiers Department. I found this field very interesting and decided to look into it due to my love of animals and my desire to help children. I visited a therapeutic farm in the center of the country and saw how children with different types of problems, mainly mental retardation, are helped using horses... (Noa).*

Mirit and Ayala want to study art therapy:

*I came back to Israel planning to study art therapy. To my disappointment I discovered that I needed 600 hours of practical work in art. It was hard for me to give up my plans, and that's when I thought about animal-assisted therapy. But that plan also didn't materialize because I found out that the Ministry of Health has not yet officially recognized this field. So that's how I got to retraining as a special education teacher, though in my heart I have not given up my original plan to work in art therapy... (Mirit).*

*I came to the college after hearing that they were offering a program combining special education with art, which is another love of my life... (Ayala).*

For Shani, the therapeutic aspects in general are important, though not yet focused:

*I understood that working with this population group involves more therapy than teaching, and I felt that this is the direction I should take. Despite all the physical and emotional difficulties, I understood that it is the therapy that attracts me[...] Learning and working as well as my contact with these children have helped me decide that I want to be involved with therapy in the future... (Shani).*

The research participants viewed special education as a stage in studying various forms of therapy. A bachelor's degree in education or psychology was a requirement for their continued studies, and the therapeutic aspect of special education is what attracted them.

#### 4. Discussion

What motivates student teachers in choosing to major in special education?

##### 4.1 Personal Biography

The analysis of the set of categories shows that the categories of "personal biography" and "reasons for career choice" constitute the kernel categories and provide the information necessary to answer the research question. Statements and criteria from the "personal biography" category are related to those from the "reasons for career choice" category.

The interviews reveal the following motives for choosing a career in special education: individual or family differences, influence of role models, success in caring for others before becoming a teacher, seeing special education as more meaningful than regular education, and personal characteristics and abilities. Nevertheless, the various motives differ in strength and in frequency, as perceived by the participants.

The factor of **individual or family differences (siblings or parents)** was the strongest and most prevalent finding. This factor emerged in the autobiographies of most of the participants as a motivating factor in choosing special education.

Among the reported differences in the family were growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust, the death of a parent, and having siblings and children with special needs. Individual differences emerged in a variety of difficulties, such as test anxiety, learning difficulties, social isolation and ostracism, medical problems and immigration.

A strong personal identity is a necessary condition for fulfilling oneself through one's career. People choose a profession or career to fulfill themselves and shape their professional identity. Already in the late 1950s, Anne Roe developed a theory to explain career choice using terms from the field of personality (Roe, 1957, in Nagar, 2001). According to Roe, an individual's set of needs and preferences is related to his choice of career. This choice develops as a result of family and environmental influences interacting with genetic factors. In her research, Roe found that parental attitudes toward the child and childhood experiences are significant factors in determining the inner needs affecting an individual's orientations to the world, including choice of profession. Hence, a child who has special needs or has experienced the special needs of someone in the family experiences the world differently, which evidently leads to choosing a nurturing profession. This finding also appears in Hillel Lavian (2003).

A study examining why educators choose to deal with weak population groups found a positive correlation between the desire to work with weak groups and experience with personal and family problems. People choose a particular profession based upon whether it suits their values and motivation (Margaret et al., 2007).

##### 4.2 Reasons for Choosing the Profession

###### 4.2.1 Success in Taking Care of others Before Becoming a Teacher

Another prominent category was success in taking care of others before becoming a teacher. More than half the participants told about a successful case of caring for someone else before they began studying to be teachers.

Klingman (1973) notes three major approaches that attempt to answer why an individual chooses a particular profession:

**General training approach:** According to this approach, the process of selecting a career begins before the decision is made and crystallizes during the individual's development.

**Opportunities approach:** This approach conforms to the behavioral approach to decision-making. Career choice is the result of a combination of random variables over which the individual has practically no control. That is, for an individual to select a particular career, he must be in the right place at the right time.

**Professional specialization approach:** This approach conforms to the theory of analytic psychology. Specific professions require a particular type of individual who has certain individual qualities and a high degree of expertise in the skills required by the profession. That is, what directs an individual to choose one profession or another is his familiarity with the individual qualities and expertise demanded by a variety of professions. At times an individual may incorrectly assess these variables, or a situation may arise in which there is no longer a need for the profession in which the individual was trained, thus leading to disappointment and frustration.

In effect, all three approaches discussed by Klingman are applicable in this category. In accordance with the first approach, the study's participants painted a picture of their experiences as tutors, helpers and teachers before they even thought about special education as a profession..

In accordance with the second approach, the participants were indeed in the right place at the right time. They experienced success and a sense of accomplishment, leading them to make their decision.

As noted, the third approach claims that individuals sometimes do not correctly assess their own qualities and expertise, and sometimes a profession becomes redundant, thus leading to disappointment and frustration. Most of the participants were already teachers specializing in different fields who decided on a career change to special education.

#### 4.2.2 Seeing Special Education as More Meaningful than Regular Education

Around half of the participants reported that they consider special education to be more meaningful than regular education. The participants were in complete agreement that if one chooses to be a teacher, then special education is a more appropriate and meaningful choice.

Pines Malach, (2011) identified two types of factors that influence teachers in deciding upon their area of specialization: external and internal. In the current study, it is the internal factors that are relevant. Among the internal factors drawing people to a particular profession are altruism – the desire to help children and contribute to society – as well as the desire for interpersonal contact at work (Hillel Lavian, 2003).

#### 4.2.3 Characteristics, Personality Attributes and Abilities

All the participants described personal characteristics and abilities that attracted them to this profession.

The literature describes the following attributes of special education teachers: a great deal of commitment, creativity, flexibility, ability to cope with unexpected situations, patience, tolerance, sensitivity and empathy toward those who are different and the desire to give of themselves, willingness to see their work as a challenge and a calling, ability and willingness to invest emotional, physical and intellectual efforts in difficult and complex work (Avudi-Dangor, 1992; Ronen, 1988).

Gavish and Friedman (2001) believe that special education teachers made a conscious decision, which fell into place during the course of their lives, to dedicate themselves to emotionally demanding work that involves giving daily assistance to society's weakest and most vulnerable.

#### 4.2.4 Role Models

Among a fifth of the interviewees, role models were found to be a leading motive in their choice of profession. One of the participants mentioned her grandfather as a role model. Another, whose mother was a nurse, felt that working in a helping profession was an inherited trait. The other participants pointed to teachers who served as role models.

Peri (2002) divided the various reasons that women choose the teaching profession into three categories. While her study focused on regular education, one category was particularly appropriate for those choosing special education: women who are "in transition" do not necessarily want to be teachers. In the current study the explanation is somewhat different. The research participants viewed special education as a stage in studying various forms of therapy. A bachelor's degree in education or psychology was a requirement for their continued studies, and the therapeutic aspect of special education is what attracted them.

#### 4.3 Summary and Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to identify the factors that motivated this sample of teaching students to study special education.

The narratives paint a picture of highly motivated students, most of who came to special education studies out of very personal reasons. Among these are **individual or family differences**. Some of the participants have learning disabilities or experienced problems in school as new immigrants. Others have siblings with special needs, so that early in their lives they **experienced success in helping others**, by taking on personal responsibility either at school

or in the army. Contrary to the findings of the study of those who choose to teach in the regular education system, some of the teachers who choose special education do so out of a desire to change the system and make it better and more empathetic, while others want to rectify the feelings of failure they experienced in the regular school system. Some of the participants noted the impact of certain teachers who served as **role models**.

All the study participants claimed to have **personal attributes and abilities** that geared them toward this profession, among them **creativity and flexibility, commitment, sensitivity and empathy, and patience**. Most of the participants consider **special education to be more meaningful than regular education**, and some see their education studies as a stage in pursuing **studies in the therapeutic professions** that will enable them to fulfill their need to care for others.

Special education teaching provides teachers with the opportunity to develop and the autonomy to change, to arrive at a different place, to behave differently, to “fix” things and thus to rectify previous experiences. It offers opportunities for developing inner strengths and for emotional, intellectual and psychological growth. These strengths are mutual, empowering me with myself and me with others, so that together “you and I will change the world.”

In the literature, special education teachers are described as having the following attributes: a great deal of commitment, creativity, flexibility, investigative skills, ability to cope with the unexpected, patience, tolerance, sensitivity, empathy for those who are different, desire to give of themselves, willingness to see their work as a challenge and a calling, ability and willingness to invest emotional, physical and intellectual resources in difficult and complex work. These contentions are compatible with the findings of the current study, which point to “the need to help and take care of those who are different” as a factor motivating the choice of special education as a career. Moreover, the current findings reveal two dominant motives. The first is that as a result of personal or familial differences, the participants came into contact with the educational system, producing in them a desire to “fix” something, either themselves or the system, and sometimes even both. The second motive is success in taking care of others even before becoming a teacher. Such success provided the participants with a sense of fulfillment and meaning so that this choice of profession meets their need for meaningful work.

The practical contribution of this study is first and foremost to raise students’ awareness of the factors leading them to choose special education. A strong sense of identity is a necessary condition for self-fulfillment through one’s career. Individuals make professional and career choices in order to realize themselves and shape their professional identity. Thus, making students aware of their motives for choosing a particular profession may help them cope with their choice. The teachers’ sincere desire to tell their stories and the openness of their narratives reflect their need for someone to listen to them. Therefore, life stories can and should be used as a practical tool for work and learning in the field.

Narrative research in the field of education and teaching can also make a contribution to educational agents working in the field by focusing on their discourse and empowering them by making their voices heard. Engaging in narrative contributes to the professional and personal development of teachers and educators. Exposing students of education to teachers’ personal stories promotes the type of intercultural understanding needed by each and every teacher.

This study also has the potential to make a contribution to educators at teacher training institutes and policymakers at the Ministry of Education. The research findings can be used as a basis for developing training programs and areas of study appropriate for those seeking a career in education.

This study involved only 20 participants in Israel. It would be interesting to carry out similar research in other countries. It would also be possible to research other professions in the health sector, social workers and teachers in regular education.

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