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What Brings BIPOC Preservice Special Educators to the Field of Education?

Charly McAllister Taylor
Brigham Young University

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Charly McAllister Taylor

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Elisabeth Cutrer-Párraga, Chair
Kendra Hall-Kenyon
Blake Hansen

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education

Brigham Young University

ABSTRACT

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Charly McAllister Taylor
Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education, BYU
Master of Science

BIPOC special educators are a needed profession throughout the country. The listener's guide was used to determine how 30 BIPOC special educators identified themselves in application essays to a special education teacher program. The essays were then used to determine common themes in BIPOC students' decision to become a special educator. These common themes were found throughout specific moments of someone's life. These moments are referred to as plotlines. These plotlines were broken down into categories: prior to elementary school, elementary school, junior high/middle school, high school, and post high school. It was found that during the elementary school plotline, many participants described having a sibling with a disability seemed to contribute to their decision to become special educators. Implications for practice, implications for research, and limitations are discussed.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Teachers who self-identify as black, indigenous, or of color have a unique perspective on themselves as educators compared to other groups of teachers. These differences develop prior to teaching (Simon & Boyd, 2023) and continue during in-service (Griffin, 2018; Ocasio, 2014). Understanding how special education teachers of color identify themselves is valuable in understanding why special education preservice teachers of color (SEPTOC) decide to enter the field of special education.

Statement of the Problem

Understanding a pre-service teacher's reasons for entering special education, particularly when they identify as black, indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC), is crucial for reducing the percentage of underrepresented teachers of color, as indicated by the Teacher-Student Parity Index (TSPI; Bettini et al., 2018). The enrollment of students of color in schools has increased, but the number of teachers of color has not. Under 18% of special educators are people of color whereas half of the student population with disabilities are people of color (Bettini et al., 2018). Although numerous initiatives have been made to increase the number of teachers of color, little is known about the factors that led them to choose the profession. Despite the high demand for teachers, fewer persons of color are choosing to pursue teaching (Kohli, 2008). According to Bettini et al. (2018), children benefit from having teachers who reflect both their own backgrounds and the racial and ethnic diversity of the entire American community.

There seems to a shortage not only of teachers but also special education teachers. It is understood in research that key reasons why special education teachers chose this field of study is their desire to instruct, assist, and improve the lives of children with disabilities with whom

they work with (McLeskey et al., 2004). Research has allowed us to understand why a special educator might choose to enter the field but the research is limited in understanding why SEPTOC choose to study special education.

Teacher identity development includes four interwoven components: personal self, professional self, experience, and theory (Beijaard & Mejer, 2017). Each of the components gives a lens into what makes up one's teacher professional identity. These lens helps a teacher have a framework to understand themselves relative to their work as well as the role their work serves in society (Sachs, 2005).

In addition, one's personal and educational history as a teacher has an impact on the formation of how teachers identify as professionals (Beijaard et al., 2004). Also relevant, there has been very little research conducted relative to the intersections of special education teacher identity development and special education teachers of color (SETOC) identity development.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals who self-identify as BIPOC developed an identity as SEPTOC by the time they apply to a highly rated special education program at a university in a western state in the US. The researcher incorporates a qualitative research methodology in hopes of gaining greater understanding of why a person of color chooses to become a special education teacher.

Research Question

This study will address the following research question:

1. How do individuals who identify as BIPOC develop a SEPTOC identity prior to admittance into a highly rated special education university teacher preparation program?

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Teacher identity development is an intricate and sophisticated process that includes

teacher beliefs, values, and sense of self (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Teacher effectiveness,

work satisfaction, and well-being has been linked to teachers' professional identities (Buchanan,

2015). The purpose of this literature review is to explore the existing body of research on teacher

identity development, with a particular emphasis on special education teacher identity

development and the unique experiences of special education teachers of color (SETOC) in

shaping their professional identity.

Teacher Professional Identity Development

Teacher professional identity is multifaceted and comprises the ideas, beliefs, values,

attitudes, and sense of self that teachers create via their experiences and relationships relative to

teaching (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). According to research, the personal and educational

histories of teachers have a crucial impact in the formation of their professional identities

(Beijaard et al., 2004). Teachers' attitudes about teaching and learning are shaped by their

upbringing, familial influences, past educational experiences, and academic preparation (Hong et

al., 2017). The idea is that teachers who have had positive educational experiences may develop

a strong sense of teacher professional identity based on their belief in the transformative power

of education (Dassa & Derose, 2017). A teacher's professional identity provides a framework for

teachers to develop their own perceptions of "how to be," "how to act," and "how to understand"

their work and role in society (Sachs, 2005, p. 15).

Teacher identity is many-sided, shifting and grows throughout a teacher's career.

Beijaard and Mejer (2017) identify four interwoven components in teacher's identity

development: (a) personal self, (b) professional self, (c) experience, and (d) theory. These processes of identity development are actively interwoven.

Personal self encompasses a person's identity relative to their life history such as where they grew up, their skin color, their choices, developed talents and abilities, their response to life obstacles, and personal beliefs. Teacher's self-conceptions provide the framework for deciding how to be, how to act, and how to understand as an educator (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard & Meijer, 2017).

A teacher's sense of a *professional identity* develops as they make decisions to teach, prepare to teach, and commit to teaching as a career (Beijaard et al., 2000). Teacher identity is dynamic; therefore, it can continue to evolve at any moment. Teacher socialization is also critical for the development of professional identity, particularly during teacher preparation programs and induction into the profession (Dassa & Derose, 2017). Mentorship and interaction with experienced teachers are important in molding teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and professional practices (Izadinia, 2018). Effective mentorship provides professional support, direction, and modeling, and promotes the development of a strong professional identity (Cutrer-Párraga et al., 2022).

A teacher's *experience* in schools, both as a student and later as a teacher, influences their practices and identity. Many teachers report playing school as children, having rewarding relationships with teachers, and expressing admiration for their teachers. Therefore, observing and exploring what it means to be a teacher in respect of these life experiences are important in the process of developing teacher identity (Bullough, 1997; Lortie, 2002).

During teacher preparation programs, preservice teachers have opportunities to learn information about teaching, teaching practice, and *theories* about how children learn. Teacher

candidates interact, practice and experiment with this theoretical knowledge as they develop and apply their own ideas about teaching. Preservice teachers may reject, tolerate, or apply their new learning allowing this sense-making process to develop (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). Teacher identity and the components identified as essential to the development of teacher identity (personal self, professional self, experiences, and theories taken up about teaching) are also impacted by teaching contexts.

Importance of Context in the Development of Teacher Professional Identity

The educational contexts for which teachers prepare and in which they work have a significant influence on the development of teacher professional identity (Izadinia, 2013). Teacher identity is affected, changed, and portrayed through one's experiences and provides a lens for the individual teacher's work (Smorgorinsky et al., 2004). According to research, teacher professional identity is shaped by way of interactions with individuals and with the environment (Beijaard et al., 2004; Buchanan, 2015; Izadenia, 2013; Korthagen, 2004). Said another way, teacher identity happens within contexts in social settings (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). Although studies have tried to determine the impact of teaching experiences, there has been no distinction between teacher identity formed based on teaching level or context. Rather, teacher identity has been treated as a single or unitary concept. Although general education teacher professional development has been explored in the literature, attention has typically not been given to whether a person is in an early childhood, elementary, or secondary general education setting.

In addition, very little has been written about teacher identity and the special education setting or if teacher identity development changes based on the level, context, or content of what is being taught (Hong et al., 2017). As a result, the development of special education teachers' identities may differ, which is crucial given that research on identity demonstrates the

significance of teacher identity for classroom practices, family relationships, and children's learning experiences (Beijaard & Mejer, 2017).

Special Education Professional Teacher Identity Development

While substantial research has explored the development of teacher identity in general education, the unique experiences related to special education teachers' professional identity development is sparse. Special education teachers receive a distinctive professional socialization process that impacts their teacher identity significantly (Boveda & Aronson, 2019).

Collaboration represents a critical role in the development of teacher identity in special education (Bettini et al., 2017). Special education teachers regularly collaborate with school-based professionals such as speech language pathologists, school psychologists, and board certified behavior analysts, to provide comprehensive support to students (Frederick et al., 2020; Kellems et al., 2016; Squires, 2023). This collaboration contributes to the formation of a teacher identity that emphasizes teamwork, effective communication, and the integration of diverse perspectives to meet students' complex needs. In contrast, general education teachers may experience less interdisciplinary collaboration, leading to differences in the development of their teacher identity (Jones, 2004). Research suggests that special education teachers see themselves differently than general education teachers, in that most often special education teachers talk about their professional identity as dedication to a cause, rather than a field of teaching (Jones, 2004).

For special education teachers, experiences such as specialized training, interactions with students with disabilities, collaboration with teams of school-based professionals and navigating the complexities of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for children and families build a sense of purpose and dedication to special education (McLeskey et al., 2004; Theobald et al.,

2021). These experiences help to create a specialized professional identity fixed on advocating for student's rights, promoting inclusive practices, and tailoring educational strategies to fit individual student's needs (Nitza & Lea, 2015). Special education teacher professional identity development also includes internal factors such as the desire to give back to society, the desire to improve the lives of children and families with disabilities, as well as motivating memories of influential teachers (Miller et al., 2022; Nitza & Lea, 2015). External factors such as living with siblings with disabilities, receiving support from special education teachers as a student or the desire to use specialized professional knowledge, are also common influencers in special education teacher identity development (Hillel Lavian, 2013; Pishghadam et al., 2022).

Special Education Teachers of Color Professional Teacher Identity Development

While research examining special education teachers' professional identity development may be sparse, the identity development of special education teachers of color (SETOC) has been underexplored (Kulkarni, 2022; Kulkarni et al., 2022; Philip, 2011). Those who identify as SETOC face the complexities of intersectionality with teacher identity influenced by both their racial and ethnic identities and their roles as a special educator (Kulkarni et al., 2022; Scott, Powell, et al., 2021). SETOC's experiences with marginalization and cultural identities sway their views of the educational system, perspectives about students with disabilities, pedagogical choices and impacts their development of teacher identity (Boveda & Aronson, 2019; Cooc & Yang, 2016). SETOC's development of teacher identity is intertwined with the affirmation of their cultural identities and their instantiation of culturally responsive practices (Bettini et al., 2018; Cormier & Scott, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2006). However, there are few spaces where SETOC can fully engage in both their identities as teachers of color and as special educators (Kulkarni et al., 2022). Kulkarni and colleagues (2022) discussed the strong need for the

creation of spaces where SETOC can feel valued as "smart, good, and knowledgeable" (p. 57), rather than being positioned as the teacher's aide, or perceived as *not* the real teacher (Ocasio, 2014; Scott, Brown, et al., 2021). It is important to implement practices and policies that welcome and nurture teachers of color. Additionally, to address the lack of SETOC, research institutions must evaluate practices that marginalize this group of teachers (Cormier et al., 2023).

The research that is available relative to SETOC developing teacher identities, highlights the importance of mentorship by individuals who share similar backgrounds and allyship with those who can help guide these teachers through the unique challenges faced by SETOC (Kulkarni et al., 2022). A study by Scott, Bell, et al. (2023) described how necessary it is for a student of color to have a teacher with a similar background. They explain that student–teacher racial/ethnic matching (e.g., Black students assigned to a Black teacher) resulted in an increase in attendance, decrease in exclusionary discipline, and allowed for more opportunities for gifted and talented programs (Redding, 2019; Scott, Bell, et al., 2023a).

"There is a dire need to call to action race-conscious efforts in education research," (Scott, Bettini, et al., 2023, p. 103). Scott, Bettini, and colleagues went on to explain that it is necessary in order to disrupt negative racialized experience of students of color. These strong mentorship and allyship connections may offer support, encouragement, role modeling and contribute to the formation of a strong teacher identity.

SETOC may desire to participate in advocacy initiatives focused on equitable opportunities for students of color with disabilities (Kulkarni, 2022; Kulkarni et al., 2022). Research indicates these advocacy experiences build their teacher identity by instilling a strong sense of social justice, equity, and recognition of the needs of their students with disabilities (Boveda & Aronson, 2019; Kulkarni et al., 2022). Further, SETOC may cultivate a teacher

identity that prioritizes the removal of systemic barriers and the development of culturally sustaining and inclusive learning environments (Cooc & Yang, 2016; Kulkarni et al., 2022).

In addition, SETOC may develop components of their teacher identity by drawing upon their community and familial ties to develop their teacher identity (Griffin, 2018). For SETOC, community engagement and participation can provide a sense of belonging, cultural affirmation, and support. Furthermore, familial influences, such as experiences with family members with disabilities or a family history of educational disparities, can significantly impact their teacher identity and frame a desire to advocate for students from marginalized backgrounds (Gaytan, 2021).

The Current Study's Rationale

Research on teacher identity recognizes that a teacher's professional identity offers understanding of: (a) the comprehension of a teacher's responsibilities including the roles they fall into and the obligations they may have; (b) perspective of teaching and learning; and (c) implementation of these perspectives in individual and professional learning contexts. Teacher identity affects pedagogical decisions, collegial contributions, and advocacy (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). More research is needed to understand and support the development of special education teacher professional identities – particularly for SETOC (Cooc & Yang, 2016).

However, support of SETOC should begin in teacher preparation programs and continue through induction in the field (Boveda & Aronson, 2019). Therefore, this study seeks to explore and understand key events, challenges, and turning points that help develop a SETOC teacher identity.

CHAPTER 3

Method

This chapter will describe the study's design and provide details on how it was carried

out. The participants, study context, data collection, analysis, and study trustworthiness will all

be covered in this chapter.

Theoretical Framework

One primary use of theory in qualitative inquiry is as a framework to guide the study

(Anfara & Mertz, 2015). A second primary application of theory in qualitative research is to

ground the research paradigm and method (Glesne, 2011). This section will explore this study's

theoretical framework relative to guiding the study as well as grounding the method of the study.

Theoretical Framework to Guide the Study

The theory of social constructivism is relevant to understanding the plot lines of special

education teacher identity development within The Listening Guide (Creswell, 2009; Gilligan,

2015) The Listening Guide (LG) and plot lines will be explained below under the section of

research design.

Social constructivism stresses that knowledge and meaning are produced via social

interactions and shared understandings within a given cultural, social, and narrative context

(Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). It holds that individuals actively engage in the development of their

identities, and that these identities, among other things, are molded by social processes and

shared narratives (McKinley, 2015). When applied to the plot lines of special education teacher

identity development, social constructivism emphasizes the impact of social interactions, cultural

factors, and language in affecting how special education teachers view and construct their

professional identities. The theory of social constructivism provides a valuable lens for analyzing

the plot lines of special education teacher identity development. It stresses the social nature of identity formation, the impact of cultural and social discourses, and the significance of narrative and storytelling in determining how special education teachers perceive, negotiate, and develop their professional identities (McKinley, 2015).

Theoretical Framework to Ground the Method of the Study

Discussion of the research paradigm and method is another primary application of theory in qualitative research (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Glesne, 2011; Green, 2014). Plot lines within the LG (Gilligan, 2015; Lugo & Gilligan, 2021) offer researchers a practical theoretical framework for exploring the formation of special education teacher identity. Plot lines, which represent the narrative (often in a timeline) structure of individuals' experiences, aid researchers in understanding the dynamic and contextual nature of identity creation (Gilligan, 2015; Lugo & Gilligan, 2021). By examining plot lines, researchers can identify crucial events, key happenings, turning points, and/or obstacles in the identify formation of special education teachers by evaluating their experiences through their narratives. Careful analysis of plot lines can support researchers to better understand how teachers negotiate, adapt, and shift their identity over time in response to changing circumstances and evolving understandings of their roles within special education.

Research Design

The Listening Guide

The Listening Guide is a method for data analysis that is created by reading a participant's narrative repeatedly. The researcher repeatedly and methodically reads the narrative, with each review having a distinct objective that builds on the one before it. The system's foundation is based on the idea that each participant has a polyphonic voice and that

distinct voices can be distinguished through repeated listening (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). The

Listening Guide can explore how one's professional identity develops, highlighting how it is a

complex process that changes over time and involves a number of different factors (Rodgers &

Scott, 2008). Typically, The Listening Guide is used to examine the data gathered via repeated,

methodical readings. Table 1 shows the typical steps of analysis for The Listening Guide.

Table 1

Steps Used for Data Analysis

Steps of Analysis	Description
Review Participant Narratives	Each participants' narrative is read multiple times.
Find Plot lines	Identify storylines, this includes critical experiences that impact participant experiences, decisions, and identities.
Identify I-Statements And Develop I-Poems	I-statements are identified from each participant's narrative. The I-statements identify fundamental characteristics of participants. Using identified I-statements, create I-Poems (Gilligan et al., 2006.)
Listen for Contrapuntal Voices	Plot lines and I-Poems evaluated to identity polyphonic (primary and secondary) voices.

Note. Due to the extent of the data, this study will analyze data relative to plot lines only (see

data analysis section).

Participants

Participants of this study included 30 candidates applying for entrance into a university level special education undergraduate program. All participants self-identified as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color). Specifically, participants self-identified as Hispanic or Latino (n =17), Bi-Racial (n= 8), Asian (n=3), Native American Indian (n=1), or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (n=1), and were mainly female (n=28). Participants who self-identified as Bi-Racial disclosed the following Bi-Racial heritages: Mexican/White (n=2), Japanese/White (n=2), Korean/White (n=1), Native Hawaiian Other Pacific Islander/Asian (n=1), Brazilian/White (n=1), and Pilipino/White (n=1).The average age of participants at the time they applied to the special education program was 24 years old with a spread of 21– 45 years old. Slightly more than half (n=16) applied to be trained to work with students with severe disabilities, while slightly less than half applied to be trained to work with students with mild to moderate disabilities (n=14). All participants were subsequently admitted into the university level special education undergraduate program within the last five years (see Table 2 for participant demographic information.)

Table 2

Participants at a Glance

Characteristics	Number of Participants
Race/Ethnicity	30
Hispanic or Latino	17
Bi-Racial	8
Asian	3
American Indian	1
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1
Program	30
Severe	16
Mild/Moderate	14
Gender	30
Male	2
Female	28

Data Collection

The data collected for this study was taken from the participants' application essays that each student had to submit to be accepted into the special education undergraduate program. After IRB approval, the special education program secretary compiled demographic information on special education licensure program student applicants who self-identified as BIPOC for the previous five years. Basic access to student data was reviewed for available reports. Alumni records (for students who were admitted to the program and who had graduated) were kept in a separate department, so a report was requested to provide demographics and include a de-

identified, randomized, record-number alternative along with their student identification number. The separate department requested clarification and IRB confirmation. Once IRB was confirmed the information was provided to the program secretary. The program secretary then filtered the data for those who self-identified as BIPOC. The program secretary then removed the student identification numbers, leaving only the de-identified numbers for participants who self-identified as BIPOC. This list was provided to the research team.

Next, application essays were requested from the Education Preparation Program (E.P.P.) department support personnel for the participants. The application essays were uploaded to Educator. Educator is the online program used across all teaching departments at the university where all applications to the respective programs are submitted for evaluation. After the application essays were uploaded to Educator, the special education program secretary downloaded them, deleted name and removed identifying student info. The de-identified applicant essays were then saved into a file. At this point the special education program secretary cross-checked each with the original report and identified the PDF with the randomized record-number alternative, providing additional confirmation that identifying information was re-checked and removed prior to providing the participants' application essays to the researchers.

Setting

In this thesis study, the researcher analyzed 30 special education teacher applicant essays with the aim of gaining insight into special education teacher identity development. The essays were created by students who identified as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) who were seeking admission to a university level special education undergraduate program. The essays were self-reflective narratives that provided insights into the applicants' experiences and perspectives on their journey toward becoming a special education teacher. The participants'

essays were in response to three questions on their application to the preservice special education teaching program. Each essay written was a response to one question. Each participant was given the same three questions, see Table 3 for the list of the questions given to the applicants.

Table 3

Questions on the Preservice Special Education Application

Question 1	Question 2	Question 3
Write about past experiences that have contributed to your decision to become a Special Educator. Chronicle the history leading up to your decision, and explain how these experiences have influenced you. Include examples of both formal and informal teaching, such as those completed in school, church, mission, coaching, tutoring, leadership or volunteer work	Write about an experience when a supervisor has asked you to do something that you did not think was the best idea or solution. How did you handle it?	Describe how your life experiences have prepared you to teach students from diverse socioeconomic and/or cultural backgrounds. Please discuss something different than working with individuals with disabilities in your response.

Prior to the participants application to the special education preservice teaching program, each student completed prerequisite classes. One of the prerequisite courses was an introduction to special education course. As part of this course, students were required to complete 10 hours of volunteering in a special education classroom. It is important to note, however, that there were a few years of participants that were not required to volunteer for 10 hours due to COVID-19 and not having access to classrooms. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions, all the participants that disclosed volunteering in a classroom and previous experiences with special education as part of their essays. There were three participants that did not disclose any connection to special education before the post high school plotline. Two of the participants that disclosed a their first connection to special education was due to special education classes that were required for their majors before they decided to become a SEPTOC. The final of the three participants that

disclosed post high school as their first experience with special education is that they became a paraprofessional after volunteering for that school as part of the universities service club.

Data Analysis

The researcher employed Gilligan and colleagues (2006) steps for plot lines in the Listening Guide Methodology to examine the plot lines presented in the participant essays. The researcher began the analysis process by thoroughly reading and familiarizing themselves with the content of the applicant essays. This initial reading helped the researcher gain an overall understanding of the participants' narratives and the key themes and plot lines that emerged. Each participant's contexts and experiences were considered and identified to create a timeline. Five specified timelines emerged: prior to elementary school, elementary school, junior high/middle school, high school, and post high school. The researcher paid close attention to the participants' narratives, identifying key events, experiences, and shifts within each timeline that contributed to their development of a special education teacher identity. These five timelines reflected the plot lines of each participant's special education teacher identity formation.

After identifying the plot lines, the researcher proceeded to code and categorize the data according to important events that oriented the participants towards special education. Codes were generated based on recurring events, experiences, and identity-related elements present in the essays. The researcher systematically organized the data according to the identified codes and created categories to capture the different aspects of special education teacher identity development across the five timelines (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Sample of Plotline Worksheet

Participant #20-1345EC239. <u>Student discloses ethnic/racial background? Yes. . No. What student discloses Mexican/Caucasian Family Member with Disability? Cerebral Palsy, Autism, Seizure Disorder Who? Cousin whom they fostered</u>

Plotlines

Prior to Elementary School	Elementary School	Middle/Jr. High	High School	Post High School prior to submitting for admittance
	I honestly learned to believe in people and believe that they can change and grow because of the years my mom spent caring about those who had gone astray. I am half Mexican and I can't count how many times I have felt different and lost and that I didn't fit anywhere. I'm not quite white enough to be white, but I'm not Mexican enough to be Mexican. I never learned Spanish However, I look like I should speak Spanish so I continually have to tell individuals in the grocery store, at work, at school, etc. that I don't speak Spanish. Then they usually respond with some judgmental comments that I shouldn't be ashamed of my culture and that I must disappoint my parents. However, my feeling of inadequacy and isolation have led me to recognize those feelings in others, and it prepared me to be a special education teacher.	My first personal interaction with a child who had disabilities was when my family became a foster family for my cousin, (cousin name). He was born prematurely and therefore he had many developmental disabilities. He has cerebral palsy, autism, seizures, and a number of other challenges. Part of my responsibilities of caring for (cousin name) included changing his feeding tube and monitoring his pump. However, the best part of living with (cousin name) was entertaining him. I loved making him laugh. I would read to him and sing to him an make funny voices. We really bonded and my love for him led me to be actively involved in his life even after he moved back in with his mom. I learned how to accept people and I learned how to live and work with people who may be very different from myself. All I want for everyone around me is to feel happy and valued for who they are. I have had multiple opportunities to be around individuals of varied cultural and economic backgrounds and I've come to love so many. These experiences have increased my ability to relate to others and understand those around me. I hope to make a difference in the lives of all those I teach.	In high school, I began volunteering in SPED classrooms. I would spend a couple of hours each week reading with children in the severe special education class. We would work on coloring projects and we tried to encourage verbal and non-verbal communication. Then, my senior year of high school, I dedicated my senior project to volunteering at a Hippo therapy and Therapeutic Riding Center. There I helped children who had physical and mental disabilities to ride horses. It was a great experience to see the soothing effects of the horses movements on the children.	This past summer I worked as a Personal Care Assistant to a little boy with severe disabilities. I would work with him on flash cards and writing his name. We would practice signing yes and no and although I never saw huge results with the mental aspect of our practices, I saw his attitude and happiness improve. It was an incredible experience to witness and I realized that I had a talent with connecting to individuals with disabilities. My current job is working with adults who have disabilities to improve their overall connection to the community and to increase their independence. It's challenging, and each person is unique but it's really allowed me to practice teaching individuals on a personalized basis and I can't wait to have students of my own in which I can assist. Honestly, I really feel that God has molded me my entire life to connect with people of various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Next, with the help of worksheets (see Appendix B) the researcher engaged in a process of theme development to identify overarching patterns and themes that emerged from the coded data. The themes represented common threads and trends in the participants' narratives, reflecting their experiences and perceptions related to special education teacher identity development. The researcher ensured that the themes were grounded in the participants' own words and experiences as reflected in the essays.

In the final step, the researcher interpreted the analyzed data to gain a deeper understanding of special education teacher identity development. The researcher examined the interconnections between the identified themes, the participants' plot lines, and the five specified timelines. The analysis focused on exploring how the participants' experiences in each timeline contributed to their development of a special education teacher identity. The researcher looked for patterns, discrepancies, and significant events that shaped the participants' understanding of themselves as aspiring special education teachers.

By following these steps, (see Figure 2) the researcher systematically analyzed the 30 special education teacher applicant essays, examining the plot lines within each participant's narrative across the five specified timelines. The analysis provided valuable insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions of special education teacher identity development, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that shape individuals' journeys toward becoming special education teachers.

Figure 2

Steps of Analysis
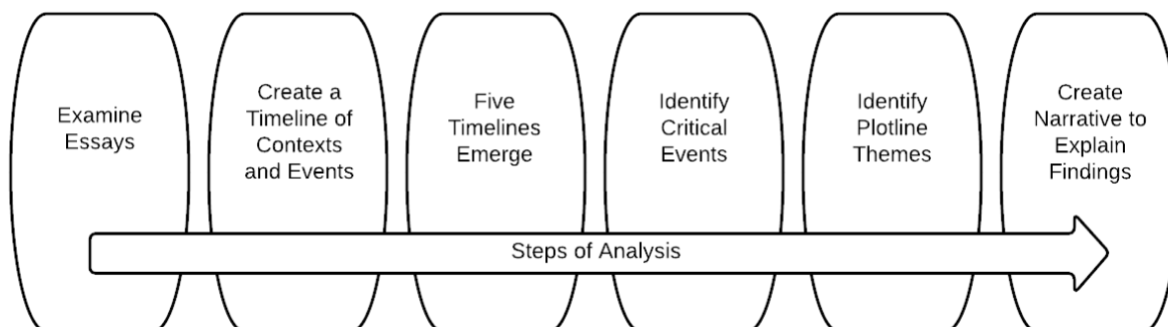
Trustworthiness

High levels of rigor are upheld in qualitative research relative to special education to ensure trustworthiness of research design, data gathering, interpretation and dissemination (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed criteria for dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. The following processes were used during data analysis to adhere to these standards: investigator triangulation, peer debriefing, exploring researcher positionality and reflexive journaling. Investigator triangulation was used when the data was being analyzed. Multiple researchers helped interpret the data using the worksheet shown in figure 1, in order to increase the credibility of the research. Peer debriefing was used throughout each stage of the research, having different research colleagues view the research. Exploring researcher positionality and reflexive journaling was done throughout the research process.

Researcher Positionality

I am a master's student in a special education program in the western United States and a white, female special education teacher at a local high school. I have been teaching for three

years, and I have a minor in teaching English as a Second Language from the university that I attended for my four-year special education preparation program. I'm curious about the educational outcomes of the Latin(x) community. In New York City, I volunteered as a humanitarian church missionary, studied Spanish, and collaborated with the Latin(x) community. My work as an ESL teacher with an endorsement at my current job has been influenced by my community work in the Latin(x) community during my time in New York. It is crucial to my professional identification in my area and to this work that I am a bilingual Spanish speaker and special educator. I have both insider and outsider status related to this research. I am a special education teacher. I had to go through the process of receiving admittance into a university special education program. I am continuing to develop my special education teacher identity. Being a special educator may provide me unique perspectives that will help me begin to comprehend the experiences of the participants in this study.

On the other hand, even though I have many experiences within the Latin (x) community, and speak Spanish, as a White teacher, I have outsider status. My outsider status impacts my understanding of the data. It is important to recognize that although I have worked with others in a specific community I am still out of my scope of competence when we look at people of color as a whole. I will never be able to fully comprehend the experiences of the SETOC for I am a White teacher. There are perspectives that I share with both special educators and people of color however, I cannot say that my experiences could be comparable to those within both communities.

In this chapter we discussed the methods using the listening guide. Because of the amount of data, this thesis study focused only on the data from the plot line data analysis. The next chapter will include findings from the data analysis.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

Each of the 30 participants described specific moments that influenced their developing

identity as a special educator. These specific situations, most often centered within the context of

schools, influenced their decision to choose special education as a career.

Plotlines

These contexts (plotlines) were organized across five time periods which were prior to

elementary school, elementary school, junior high or middle school, high school, and finally

post-secondary education (see Figure 3). Within specific contexts of place and time (such as

time as a student in elementary school), participants described scenarios which impacted and

informed their development as a special educator. Figure 4 represents a visual of impacting

events during specific contexts of time and place for the participants. Each of these impacting

events will be described in detail below using quotes from participant's lived experiences as

evidence. It is important to note that many participants described moments throughout more than

one plotline that influenced their decision to become SEPTOC.

Figure 3

Impacting Plot Line Contexts for Participants Across Time
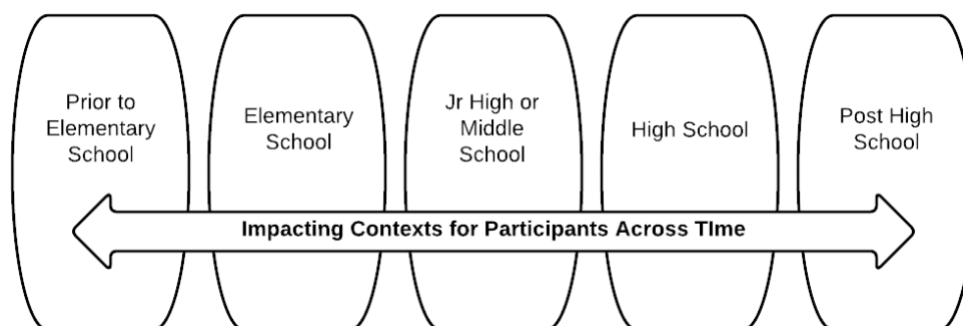
Figure 4

Impacting Events Across Participant Plot Lines
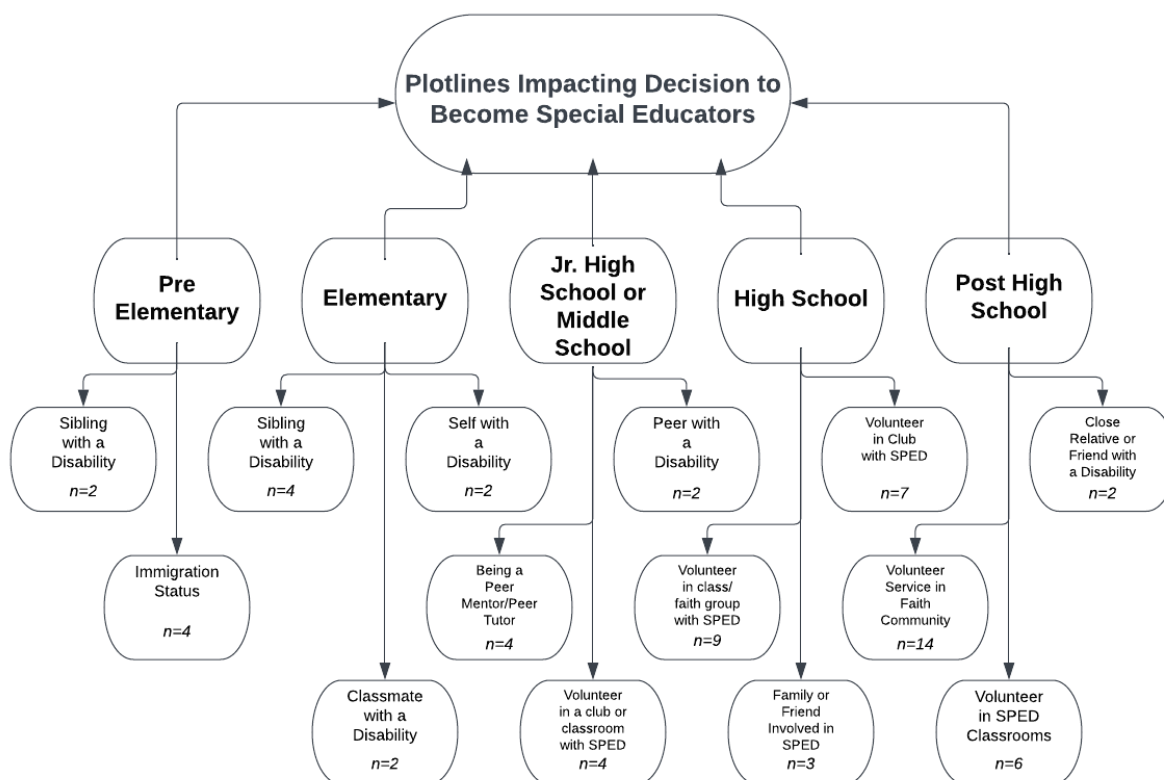
Experiences Prior to Elementary School

Six participants describe an experience in prior to elementary school that influenced their decision to become SEPTOC. Two main representational themes emerged that impacted or influenced participants' developing a special educator identity prior to them entering elementary school. These two plot line events were immigration status and a sibling being diagnosed with a disability.

Immigration Status

Multiple participants, who identified as biracial discussed how parent grandparents' or their own immigration experiences impacted their decisions to become a special educator. For example, the following participant shared:

> My mother is from the Philippines, so most of her family does not speak English very well. I have practice learning to converse with people who do not have English as a first language or who communicate differently. I believe this can help me teach students from a diverse culture background [participant 19].

For these participants, witnessing the struggle and isolation of family members who immigrated to the United States impacted decisions to become special education teachers.

Similarly, other participants spoke about how exposure to the cultures of their parents or grandparents who had immigrated to the United States impacted their choice of becoming a special educator. Participants disclosed that exposure to multiple cultures in their early years helped them recognize how differences can be strengths which turned to a desire to create a classroom in which children with differences of culture and abilities are celebrated; "I have experienced the work required to communicate between and blend cultures my whole life" [participant 7].

Living With a Sibling With a Disability

The second theme identified by the participants as impactful in the choice to become a special education teacher prior to elementary school was living with a sibling with a disability. Multiple participants shared about the impact of this experience. For example, one participant discussed their sibling with Cerebral Palsy.

I have a sister who has Cerebral Palsy and I had the opportunity to help take care of her starting as a very young child. Working with people with disabilities, especially my sister, has brought me the most joy in my life [participant 24].

Another participant talked about their sibling with Down Syndrome as an experience that has contributed to their decision to become a special educator, "My younger brother [name of brother] has Down Syndrome he's an incredible gift. Even before starting school, I learned patience and perseverance among so many other things from him" [participant 29].

Experiences in Elementary School

Focusing specifically on the plotline identified as during the elementary school years, eleven participants described their first moment that impacted their special education teacher identity. Three themes were identified by the participants. The three themes were: having a sibling diagnosed with disability, having a classmate with a disability, and experiences of self, struggling in elementary school.

Having a Sibling Diagnosed With a Disability

The first theme, having a sibling diagnosed with a disability, was disclosed by multiple participants. The participants primarily discussed that having a *younger* sibling diagnosed with a disability was impactful in developing a special educator identity. The following participant shared, "My little brother was diagnosed with autism when I was five years old. He attended my elementary school for kindergarten, and I had the opportunity to be a "best buddy" for him in the classroom" [participant 3]. Another participant said,

I realized I wanted to become a special educator when I was eight years old. At that time, one of my little sisters was diagnosed with [name of syndrome]. A rare genetic disorder that has severely impacted her mental and physical capabilities [participant 8].

There was an additional participant who described how playing with their cousin who was diagnosed with down syndrome during her elementary school years helped her decide to become a special educator,

> As a child, I loved playing with my cousin [name of cousin], who has Down Syndrome. I didn't get to see her very often, but when I did, I loved seeing her and sharing the light that she seemed to radiate so naturally. This was especially true when [cousin] was diagnosed with cancer…she never failed to make us happier, even under her most painful circumstances. Because of the happiness that [cousin] had always brought into my life, when the opportunity to volunteer as a P.E special needs buddy appeared, I readily took it [participant 28].

An interesting note found in our study was that although volunteering with special education programs was found as young as elementary school, volunteering only occurred in the elementary plotlines of those who described a sibling with a disability.

Classmate Diagnosed With a Disability

Another impacting event or scenario participants experienced during their elementary school years was having a classmate diagnosed with a disability. For example, the following participant said,

> My history with those that have disabilities started when I was in second grade in elementary school. In second grade I met [classmate name] who had scoliosis. We have been friends for the past sixteen years; growing up together [classmate name] had surgery that made him handicapped for moths at a time, and I would help [participant 27].

Multiple participants talked about how impactful it was for them to work with or play with their classmates with a disability. There were 41 instances by 26 participants where it was disclosed that they volunteered, worked with a classmate, or had a classmate with a disability. One of the participants explained that they participated in a "Big Brother" program. This participant was paired with their little brother in adaptive P.E. (adaptive P.E. is specially designed instruction provided to students who are unable to participate in a regular physical education class.) "There were six kids in his class and each had a big buddy. We would go into their class once a week and help them in an adapted physical education class" [participant 3]. Another participant described that they volunteered in their little sister's daycare - the little sister that has a disability. "My sister's daycare/early intervention center needed volunteers over the summer. So, every summer in elementary school I went and helped at the daycare" [participant 8].

Self With a Disability

Other participants talked about how their own struggles in school helped them to decide to become a special education teacher. One participant shared, "I didn't need to struggle as much as I did. I want to make sure no one else struggles the way I did by becoming a special education teacher" [participant 2]. Because of their own struggles with learning in elementary school, these participants developed empathy for others who struggled and developed a desire to teach them well. Another participant described that because they were an English Language Learner (ELL), they struggled in school until they were able to speak English more proficiently.

Experiences in Junior High/Middle School (JH/MS)

Although there were only four participants that identified that JH/MS was their first influential plotline for becoming SEPTOC, other participants who had a prior influence in their identity also mentioned moments during the JH/MS plotline that influenced identity. Three themes were apparent during the participants' JH/MS plotlines. The themes were having relationship to someone with a disability, an experience as a peer mentor/peer tutor, and experiences while volunteering with a specific club or program that were focused on students with disabilities.

Having a Relationship to Someone With a Disability

The first theme that the participants had a relationship with someone with a disability was recognized. Participants described being impacted by a relationship with someone with a disability during JH/MS in a variety of ways. One participant described becoming friends with a person their age who was deaf or hard of hearing at church. This participant described an overwhelming desire to be able to speak to her friend, so she took classes to learn to speak ASL and communicate with her friend. Another participant described having a younger sister who was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (participant described it as "Aspergers') while in JH/MS and explained "My interest in this field began when my family learned that my youngest brother has Asperger syndrome. I am close to him, so special education has been close to my heart for years" [participant 6]. Another participant discussed that their family became a foster family for a cousin with a Developmental Disability, Ceberal Palsy, and Autism. This participant discussed feeling empowered as she learned to monitor her cousin's feeding tube. Even though participants shared different experiences of being in relationship with a person with a disability, they all described being impacted and empowered by the experiences when they were in JH/MS.

Being a Peer Mentor/Peer Tutor

The next theme discussed within participants' JH/MS plotline is that of being a peer mentor/peer tutor. Multiple participants discussed how being a peer tutor/peer mentor during JH/MS influenced their decision to become a special educator. For example, one participant served at their brother's therapeutic pathways as a peer mentor and realized that they wanted to be an advocate for those with disabilities:

> Because I learned to play with and help teach [name of brother], I was able to volunteer with this program as a peer mentor. Through this experience, I resolved that I wanted to be an advocate for persons with disabilities. [participant 22]

Another participant mentioned becoming a peer tutor to an autistic classmate in gym class that they helped accomplish specific task. The participant shared two specific victories with this classmate. They shared, "I loved seeing the progress that [name] made over the school year; in his physical abilities to complete the tasks given to him…After having [name] as a buddy, any opportunity to teach and be around children with special needs was exciting" [participant 28].

Volunteering With a Club or Program Focused on Individuals With Disabilities

The final theme recognized in the JH/MS plotline was how volunteering with a club or program focused on individuals with disabilities influenced participants' decisions to become special educators. One participant discussed how her volunteer work, playing music to nursing home residents, helped her realize she could become a special educator. The participant described that spending time with those with special needs made a difference in her life. They said,

Beginning in the sixth grade, I went to a local nursing home and provided musical entertainment to the residents there. I did this up until I graduated high school. Although the elderly residents did not necessarily have a disability, I was able to see how simply spending time with someone can greatly improve their well-being and this translates directly into Special Education. [participant 1]

Another example of the impact of volunteering in JH/MS was a participant who served as a youth counselor for those with special needs. This participant described how this experience led to a desire to become a special educator. "I had the chance to be a peer tutor and then also a youth counselor…It was working with all these students that gave me the desire to study Special Education" [participant 24].

Experiences in High School

Six participants described their first experience that influenced their decision to become a special education preservice teacher during the high school plotline. The themes that were identified as part of the high school plotline were participant membership in some sort of club for students with disabilities, participants volunteering in classrooms with students with disabilities (at school or church) and learning from family/ friend who is involved with special education.

Membership in Club or Camp for Students With Disabilities

The first theme recognized was that the participants were members of some sort of club or camp for students with disabilities. Multiple participants discussed their membership as part of specific organizations such as Best Buddies, Circle R Club, or PALS.

Participants described hanging out with their "Best Buddy" in the special education resource room.

> I often spent time in our high school resource room, and I was able to hang out with not only my Best Buddy, but with all the other students with special needs in our school. Because of these experiences and my love of serving others, I have a desire to become a special educator. [participant 1]

Other participants shared how membership in a special education club, created opportunities to interact with other students with disabilities and do activities together. One participant admitted to being elected as the President of this club and shared

> When I was in High school, I was president of a club called Circle R Friends. This was an organization that did different activities with children that had special needs this is where I found out what my calling was and since than I have never looked back. [participant 2]

Another participant talked about her experiences in a club named PALS,

> In high school I was part of a PAL's program, which gave me the opportunity to work with students with disabilities. When I started, I wasn't planning to become a Special Educator. However, as I worked with the students I grew to recognize how special they were and I realized I truly enjoyed helping people. I enjoyed helping and watching them succeed, and I began to believe that Special Education was the career path I wanted to take. [participant 19]

Similarly, participants wrote about how working as camp counselors for kids with special needs helped them "find their calling" in special education. One shared,

I was with kids that had special needs every day…Some days I would have different bruises on my arms or scratches from the kids not knowing how to express their anger and not once was I ever mad at the kids. I just kept on loving and never stopped. Through this I feel like I felt a little what Christ feels for us- we sin and hurt him but he constantly loves us. If I can be Christ's hands in the special education field, there is nothing else I ever want to do in my life. [participant 2]

Another participant shared,

> When I was fifteen years old, I had the opportunity to volunteer for 72 hours at a camp specifically for children with special needs. It was great to interact, take care of, and teach new skills to those wonderful souls. [participant 14]

A different participant described the experienced that gave them the desire to be a special educator,

> I volunteered at summer-camps for children with disabilities. They were harder to control, as the camps were less formal than a classroom would be. Although there were difficult scenarios, my desire to work as a special educator intensified as I learned about what that meant. It takes patience, understanding, and love for the work. I've seen how much I could learn from these children as they learn from me. [participant 15]

Participants Volunteering in Classrooms With Students With Disabilities at School or Church

Another consistent theme throughout the high school plotline discussed by the participants was that they volunteered in special education classrooms or in church programs to support individuals with disabilities.

Volunteering in Special Education Classrooms

Multiple specifically participants discussed that they volunteered in a special education classroom. Many described their volunteer work in high school as becoming an assistant to a special education teacher, assisting other teachers who taught students with disabilities, or becoming a peer tutor in high school. A participant shared,

I spent a great amount of time interacting with the special needs students in her class. I was a peer tutor for a couple students with learning disabilities and it was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. The way that [name of teacher] interacted with me as a student inspired me to be that same positive role model in somebody else's life.

[participant 11]

A particularly impactful experience of assisting a teacher with students with disabilities in high school included a participant who assisted in a Special Education dance class,

My dance teachers noticed that I had experience working with students with disabilities. I was offered a job at the dance studio that I attended to assist in a class for students with disabilities…I began to realize that I had a passion for special education. [participant 22]

Another participant shared about assisting a teacher with students with disabilities in music class, "I helped prep for performances and class lessons" [participant 7]. Although volunteering in a special education classroom was required for a prerequisite class before admittance into the special education preservice teacher program, only two participants described a course experience as their first experience working with students with a disability.

Serving Individuals With Disabilities in the Context of a Faith Community

Three participants in the high school plotline discussed how experiences serving individuals with disabilities in the context of their faith community influenced their special education identity. Participants explained that helping individuals with disabilities find their identity in church in turn impacted participants to become a special education teacher,

> I was found and accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ and something within me completely changed. I had a hope for myself that I hadn't had for a year, and understanding that I mattered and could accomplish anything, and a love for others who may be suffering from a challenge in their life. This is when I first knew that I needed to be a special education teacher. [participant 12]

Learning From Family Members or Friends Who Were Involved With Special Education

The final theme that was identified in the context of the high school plotline was that of learning from family members or friends who were involved with special education. For example, one participant explained the impact when her family took care of a two-year old girl with disabilities for a month. She described this two-year old as having multiple disabilities including an Intellectual Disability, Developmental Disability, Visual Impairment, and a Speech Disorder. The participant described spending so much time with this two-year old helped the participant want to look for the potential in her and others like her.

Another participant wrote about having a best friend with a sister with a disability. The sister with a severe disability was nonverbal and couldn't walk. "I was uncomfortable around her at first, but as I got to know her, she taught me that even someone who cannot walk or speak could influence people's lives. I wanted to do that" [participant 18].

Participants also disclosed the influence of having a parent who worked as a special education aid, paraeducator, or teacher. These participants described that they spent a lot of time in the special education classrooms of their mothers. One participant shared about the impact of spending so much time in her mother's special education classroom,

When my mom started working for my school district as an aid for those with disabilities my sophomore year of high school, my whole view of special education changed… They accepted me…They showed me how rewarding it is to work with those with disabilities. [participant 23]

Another participant shared how spending time with the students in her mother's special education classroom helped her understand that students with disabilities can learn – which in turn helped her to work with her cousin with a disability – which in turn created a desire within her to become a special educator.

Experiences Post High School (Prior to Admittance Into Special Education Program)

Only three participants described their first experience that influenced their identity as SEPTOC. The themes identified in the post-high school plotline that were impactful in developing a special education identity included participants' serving a church mission in which they met an individual with a disability, volunteering in schools with individuals with disabilities, or relationships with a family member or friend with a disability.

Serving A Volunteer Church Mission and Interacting With Individuals With Disabilities

Many participants shared about how serving a volunteer mission for their church influenced their decision to become a special educator. They discussed meeting individuals with disabilities and learning to love to work with them. One participant described their experience with an individual with an intellectual disability with whom they worked,

I met a man who was interested, but others had never worked with him because of his Intellectual Disability. I decided to start working with him. It required patience, time, and creativity, but I learned to treasure every minute of it. [participant 6]

Volunteering (Working) in Schools With Individuals With Disabilities

The second theme that was identified was that the participants volunteered or worked with individuals with disabilities in schools, after the participant had graduated from high school. For example, the following participant talked about volunteering in a special education school, "I've been volunteering at [special education school] and have had so many great experiences there working with children with special needs. Working with people with disabilities, has brought me the most joy in my life" [participant 24].

Many of the participants also discussed how they stepped into teaching positions by volunteering. One participant described how her volunteer work led to a job as a special education paraprofessional, "[I] volunteered in my son's kindergarten classroom. Then I was asked to take the job of the paraprofessional in her classroom when her aide quit" [participant 21]. Another participant also shared about the impact of working as a paraprofessional in a special education classroom, "[I] worked as a paraprofessional working exclusively with students with autism and other special needs. This solidified my decision to become an educator of those with special needs" [participant 14].

Other participants described their experiences volunteering as respite care workers and camp instructors. The following participant disclosed,

I came to college and looked for volunteer opportunities in the area. I heard of adaptive aquatics and Friday Kid's Respite and decided to give each of them a try. I had the opportunity to play with kids and learn and grow from my interactions with them. [participant 30]

For another participant, the experiences as a camp instructor in charge of their own classroom was impactful. She recalled,

> As a summer job, I had the opportunity to work as a LEGO camp instructor for children ages five to twelve. This was the first time that I was in charge of a classroom on my own. Working this job provided me further confirmation that I want to teach and work with children with different needs. [participant 3]

Relationships With Family or Friends With Disabilities

The final theme recognized during the post high school plotline was that the participant had a relationship with someone who either had a disability or had a child with a disability. This person of a close relation was identified by participants as a spouse, child, or friend. One participant discussed that they have been friends with someone for the last 16 years who has a disability.

Findings Across Plotline Contexts

During analysis, we also noticed patterns of impactful scenarios across plot line contexts. Impactful events that crossed plotline contexts included a sibling with a disability, classmates or peers with disabilities, and volunteering. Each will be discussed below.

Sibling With a Disability

Participants spoke of the impact of a sibling with a disability across three plotline contexts: prior to starting elementary school, in elementary school, and JH/MS. Notable, in the prior to elementary school context, participants spoke of *living* with a sibling with a disability. In the elementary school context, participants spoke of the impact of having a *younger* sibling *diagnosed* with a disability. Similarly to the elementary school experience, in the context of JH/MS, the participant described their experience when their *younger* sibling was *diagnosed* with a disability.

Classmate, Peer, or Friend With a Disability

Participants spoke specifically of the impact of a classmate, peer, or friends with a disability across three plotline contexts: in elementary school, in JH/MS, and post high school. In the elementary school context, participants spoke of *classmates* with disabilities, while in the JH/MS contexts, participants spoke of *peers* with disabilities as impactful and within the post high school context, participants spoke of *friends* with a disability.

Volunteer Work With Individuals With Disabilities

Participants described the impact of volunteering with individuals with disabilities as impacting their development of a special education teacher identity across four plotline contexts: in elementary school, JH/MS, high school, and post high school. In elementary school, participants described volunteering in relationship to a sibling with a disability. For instance, participants shared how they volunteered in a program to support a younger sibling with a disability either as a "best buddy," "big buddy," or volunteer in a daycare setting. In the JH/MS context, participants shared about becoming volunteer peer mentors or tutors. In high school, participants described working as volunteers with individuals with disabilities as volunteering in

special education classrooms, clubs, camps, or in church settings. In the post high contexts, participants discussed volunteering with individuals with disabilities as serving volunteer church missions where they interacted with individuals with disabilities, and volunteering in schools or as respite workers (see Table 4).

Table 4

Cross Plotline Impactful Events

Sibling with a Disability	Classmate, Peer, or Friend with a Disability	Volunteering
Prior to Elementary School	Elementary School	Elementary
Elementary School	Junior High/Middle School	Junior High/ Middle School
Junior High/Middle School	Post High School	High School
		Post High School

Conclusion

In conclusion, the plotline experiences of the participants, as revealed by the analysis, spanning from prior to elementary school, throughout elementary school, JH/MS, and high school and into post high school years played a significant role in the formation of their special education teacher identities. Through the exploration of their personal essays, it became clear that defining experiences encountered throughout their educational journeys influenced their desire to become special education teachers. These experiences not only influenced their understanding of the unique needs and challenges faced by students with disabilities, but also

instilled within them a strong sense of empathy, resilience, and commitment to teaching and

supporting these individuals in the role of special educator.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Our study explored how SEPTOC described crucial events, key happenings, turning points, and/or obstacles in developing a special education teacher professional identity. In this study, crucial events, key happenings or turning points were described as living with or having a young sibling identified with a disability, having a classmate, peer, or friend with a disability, and volunteering with a group or organization with people with disabilities.

Comparison of Findings to Literature

Study Findings That Agree With Previous Literature

Several of our findings mapped on with previous literature about the formation of teacher professional identity. Teacher professional identity is developed in ecology with an individual's personal and educational history (Beijaard et al., 2004). Many of our participants provided evidence that their personal and educational backgrounds influenced how they viewed their own special education teacher identity. The participants often identified specific moments in their history that had influenced their decision to become a special educator. These experiences were often in the home (with a sibling with a disability), in a classroom (volunteering with special education teachers and students or in teachers' classrooms with students with disabilities), or at an event (such as a club or camp) where others with disabilities attended. Our findings supported that teacher identity is often developed during one's earlier years much like the literature discusses (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). 17 of the participants that indicated that the first development of their teacher identity was in the prior to elementary school and elementary school plotlines.

Our findings also supported research that suggests teachers who have had positive educational experiences may develop a strong sense of teacher identity (Dassa & Derose, 2017). This was evidenced by the way all participants grounded many of their turning point experiences in the context of schools (e.g., elementary school, junior high/middle school, and high school). Participants described being asked or volunteering to work with classmates with disabilities in school classrooms. Others describe volunteering in their schools. Participants also describe hanging out in resource classrooms (i.e., resource rooms typically describe classrooms in schools where special education pull in students with mild to moderate disabilities to work on specific goals). One participant with this experience said, "Because of these experiences and my love of serving others, I have a desire to become a Special Educator" [participant 1]. This idea of working in schools with students with disabilities as part of their own schooling was a recurring idea for many of our participants.

Another way this research maps on with literature in the field is the idea that special education teachers view themselves differently than general education teachers. Often special education teachers talk about their professional identity as dedication to a cause (Jones, 2004). Our findings support this research. Three of the participants described feeling they were "called to the work of a special educator." One participant shared:

> When I was in high school, I was president of a club called [name of the club]. This was an organization that did different activities with children that had special needs this is where I found out what my calling was and since than I have never looked back. [participant 2]

Another way our findings map on with the literature is the idea so many of the participants described that they wanted to become a special education teacher in order to advocate for others with disabilities or look for and develop the potential of individuals with a disability. This idea agrees with Nitza and Lea's (2015) work, who suggest special education teachers' identity is strengthened by advocating for students' rights, promoting inclusive practices, and tailoring educational strategies to fit individual student's needs. important to keep their culture they came from.

Study Findings add to and Clarify Previous Literature

We also had findings that did not agree entirely with previous research in the field – but did add to it or clarify it in some way. For example, previous research on teacher identity formation suggests that a preservice teacher's experience in schools influences their identity as a teacher (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Studies describe teachers having reported that they played school as a child, had a gratifying relationship with teachers, and an admiration for teachers (Chen & Mensah, 2018). Understanding what it means to be a teacher in respect of these experience is important when understanding one's identity as a teacher (Bullough, 1997; Lortie, 2002).

Likewise, our findings included multiple occurrences where participants detailed how their experiences playing school as a child, or their relationships with those in the school helped them develop their special education teacher identity. For example, in this study participants explained how they wanted to be a teacher from a young age and would come home from school to teach their family members what they learned. One notable difference is participants in this study described that in addition to playing school and teaching family members, participants in this study would then try and teach what they learned to their struggling friends.

Like other literature, the participants in this study also describe being impacted by schools, but they would then describe spending great amounts of time in a special education classroom because of a parent working as a special education teacher or special education paraprofessional. This idea maps on with literature that suggests that special education preservice teachers of color are more likely to develop their identity in the context of family (Marks et al, 2005). For example, participants in our study describe volunteering in their parent's special education classrooms. This allowed the participants to develop an understanding on teaching practices, within a context where they felt safe, "I learned a very valuable lesson about how to actively teach while volunteering in a resource classroom" [participant 5].

The literature about SEPTOC identity development also suggests the need to support other diverse individuals like themselves in meaningful ways (Tangen & Beutel, 2017). To this end, several participants described how they found the love for special education teaching when they were serving a volunteer church humanitarian mission and they worked with individuals with disabilities. They would describe feeling uncomfortable at first, then learning to love these individuals which created a desire within them to become a special education teacher.

Study Findings Unique to Previous Literature

Our study offers some unique perspectives to the extant literature on teacher identity formation. In this study, we explore teacher identity development of SEPTOC. Heretofore, research on teacher identity has been more often treated as a unitary construct (Jones, 2004). Teacher identity research previously has indicated that the relationship with one's teacher is often an influence for their decision to become an educator (Bullough, 1997; Lortie, 2002). Our findings indicated that most often for the SEPTOC they indicate that it wasn't necessarily about their teachers that affected their decisions to become and educator rather it was the experience of

being in a special education classroom, volunteering in the special education classroom, or having a relationship with someone who has a disability. The literature has very little written about teacher identity of a special educator. There is also a gap in exploring the intersection of identity development of special education teachers and of teachers of color. The literature that suggests SETOCs' development of teacher identity is intertwined with the affirmation of their cultural identities and their instantiation of culturally responsive practices (Bettini et al., 2018; Cormier & Scott, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Participants in this study often wrote about this idea as the following participant demonstrates:

> I am so grateful for the opportunity I had of being exposed to a new culture that I had to adapt to and work hard to be understood. Nevertheless, I did not leave my culture behind. At home, I speak Spanish, I eat Guatemalan food, I dance salsa all the time. I am able to understand people and students from different backgrounds because I came from a different background [participant 17].

However, this research also acknowledges there are few spaces where SETOC/SEPTOC can fully engage in both their identities as teachers of color and as special educators (Kulkarni et al., 2022). Kulkarni and colleagues (2022) discussed the strong need for the creation of spaces where SETOC can feel valued as "smart, good, and knowledgeable," (p. 57), (Ocasio, 2014; Scott, Brown, et al., 2021). SEPTOC participants in this study suggested contexts, experiences and opportunities where a SEPTOC could feel valued. These were contexts where participants volunteered that included serving individuals from diverse cultures *and* those who had disabilities.

Still, the literature on SEPTOC professional identity development is underexplored. Like the literature, our study also suggests SEPTOC identify both a teacher of color and a special educator (Kulkarni et al., 2022; Scott, Powell, et al., 2021). Having both identities provides each participant a unique perspective that should not be dismissed. As addressed in the literature, a SETOC's/SEPTOC's perspective and their identity influences the way that they see the education system and their perspectives on students with disabilities (Boveda & Aronson, 2019; Cooc & Yang, 2016).

A unique perspective this study offers is the way multiple participants in this study described their experience with having parents who were first generation immigrants as impactful in their special education teacher identity development. One participant shared how this context helped in their quest to become a special educator, "My mom is from [countryname]… I have had practice learning to converse with people who do not have English as a first language. I believe this can help me teach students from diverse culture backgrounds and abilities" [participant 19]. Another participant shared,

> I am so grateful for the opportunity I had of being exposed to a new culture that I had to adapt to and work hard to be understood…I am able to understand people and students from different backgrounds because I came from a different background. I know how hard and frustrating it may be at times to not be understood [participant 17].

The participants' experiences as an immigrant, or the stories of parents, or grandparents who were immigrants impacted their special education teacher identity.

Insights Gained

From this research we gained valuable insights into the experiences of special education preservice teachers of color (SEPTOC).

Family With a Disability

Many of our participants shared that having a sibling or close family member with a disability influenced their decision to become a special educator. From analyzing the data, we noticed that having a family member with a disability had a large impact on their decision to become a special educator.

Impact of sibling with a disability. It was interesting to note that those participants who disclosed they had a *sibling* with a disability also indicated knowing they wanted to be a special educator at a younger age. These participants were already starting to volunteer with individuals with disabilities as elementary-aged school children. For example, one participant described their experience volunteering at their sister's daycare. Another participant was part of a big buddy program where they were paired with their little brother in elementary school.

Impact of family member with a disability. Participant experiences with a family member with a disability included a participant who described becoming the foster family for their cousin. This participant described being specifically in charge of the cousin's feeding tube and pump. It was interesting to see that before high school the participant described a love for entertaining and taking care of their cousin and wanting to do this for others. Another participant described how they 'refused to believe their cousin couldn't be taught' when the family was mourning over the cousin received a disability diagnosis and being labeled as a special education student. This participant increased their identity as a special education teacher as they helped

teach their cousin learn certain skills. The participant described, "Through very intensive work, I taught her a few words and signs" [participant 25].

Power of Volunteering With Individuals With Disabilities in a Club or Camp

Our findings indicated that many participants participated in a club or camp program with individuals with disabilities. This experiences was described as impactful in developing a special education teacher identity for two thirds of the participants. These clubs or programs included: being a big buddy, day care volunteer, coaching special Olympics, volunteering at therapeutic pathways, Best Buddies, Circle R, working as a camp counselor, Pal's Program, and Hippo therapy and therapeutic riding center.

Being part of a club or program increased these participants' identity as a special educator. Each of the participants had a different experience participating or volunteering with a given club or organization. These experiences were spread across almost all of the plotlines. The only plotline that did not have an event where a participant was a volunteer or participant in a club was the prior to elementary school plotline. Due to the fact that so many participants discussed their experiences as part of a club or program, it led us to reason that a club or camp experience might influence one's decision to become a special educator in that it allows a SEPTOC to begin to develop efficacy in helping an individual with a disability.

Struggling Themselves

Another insight found was that the participants that described a struggle themselves, also described that this was one of their reasons for wanting to study special education. One participant specifically described, "I did struggle more than the average student. But once I hit middle school I decided I was not going to fit into the statistics of the world. And I could help others like myself" [participant 2]. The participant never discussed what statistic they were

mentioning but it could be that this struggled may have helped them decide to become a special educator, since they understood what it felt like to struggle and they wanted to help others who struggle.

Immigrant Background

Another insight that was gained from the study is that participants that have a background where they themselves immigrated or their parents or grandparents are immigrants have a unique perspective into developing a SEPTOC identity. Some participants describe what it was like living in a home where English wasn't their first language, needing to teach their parents about everyday tasks that were new to the parents and in which the parents struggled but the participants mastered in the United States. This was impactful to participants in developing the desire to help others who struggled.

Participants who disclosed being immigrants themselves or having parents or grandparents who struggled also described wanting to become special education teachers because they "didn't want others who were different" to be "discriminated against" as they had been. This idea was explained by a participant grappling with her own experiences of feeling marginalized, "I am half Mexican and I can't count how many times I have felt different and lost and that I didn't fit anywhere. I'm not quite White enough to be White, but I'm not Mexican enough to be Mexican. I don't speak Spanish" [participant 20]. It is important that researchers include stories like this into our studies because not every person of color feels like they fit with a specific group or organization. Although the participant is an immigrant and identified with aspects of that culture, they also describe that they didn't identify completely with any culture and acknowledged how most people made assumptions about them. This experience drove this participant to become a special education teacher so that others would not feed as she had felt.

Implications and Recommendations

This research informs implications for practice that could be helpful to SEPTOC. It is important for special education teacher educators to acknowledge the different cultural backgrounds and histories of their applicants. Research has indicated that more attention needs to be given to the differences that may be found in a SEPTOC identity. We recommend that additional research be completed on how the support of SEPTOC begin in teacher preparation programs and be continued through induction in the field (Boveda & Aronson, 2019). We encourage efforts to help SETOC understand that they can be themselves. Individual identity, professional identity, and experiential identity is valuable in understanding who we are as educators.

We recommend special education teacher education programs be informed as to how SEPTOC develop a professional identity. Given evidence that some teachers of color plan to leave education as early as teacher preparation (Simon & Boyd, 2023), we feel it is imperative that special education teacher education programs planners become aware of and attend to components of SEPTOC teacher identity development such as opportunities to advocate for students with similar backgrounds.

Now that we have the results from this research we now need to look at other possibilities that were opened up such as SEPTOC professional identity once they enter the field of education, specific self-identities of SEPTOC focusing on different groups, analyzing specific plotlines like the participants that were introduced to special education as young as prior to elementary school, and continuing the method described in the listening guide to evaluate the contrapuntal voices found in the application essays.

We recommend that additional research be done with new research questions. Research questions that focus on Research can be done focusing on a specific group of SEPTOC and how they identify themselves prior to entering the preservice program. Additional research could be done using different prompts, possibly altering the responses volunteered by the participants.

Limitations and Future Research

Qualitative generalization is different than generalization in statistical studies. Instead, qualitative work use naturalistic generalization, where the reader decides how the research applies to various settings and contexts. Importantly, there were unique markers in this research: the participants in this study were immigrants, different ethnicities, and many of the participants were devout, participating members of the same faith.

This study's generalizability may be limited in that the application essays evaluated were all to the same special education teacher prep program at the same university. This program is located at a private university. Each applicant had the same or similar religious background, many of the participants described their experiences teaching this faith on a church humanitarian or service mission. It is important to recognize that the finding could be different if there was variety in participants. Additionally, the participants were all given the same essay prompts. Having the same prompt guided the responses that the participants gave. Other prompts may have prompted other disclosure of events that influenced the decision to become a SEPTOC.

Further research should examine preservice special education teacher application essays at other universities from differing backgrounds. It is important to recognize that the finding could be different if there was variety in participants. It would also be interesting to look specifically at immigrations status, is there a connection between status and desire to be special education teachers or is it an anomaly of the population sample.

Conclusion

In conclusion, how do individuals who identify as BIPOC develop a SEPTOC identity prior to admittance into their teacher preparation program? How they develop SEPTOC identity and how it impacts teacher preparation programs specifically. The identity of special education preservice teachers of color was found to be influenced personally and professionally. These participants included specific experiences that influenced the way that they identified as educators. The identity of special education preservice teachers of color was found to be influenced personally and professionally.

Special education preservice teachers of color have common themes when analyzing the reasons why they decide to become special educators. Although there were themes across all participants, themes can also be broken down into specific points in the context of their lives. These points or plotlines were broken into prior to elementary school, elementary school, Junior High/Middle School, High school, and Post High school. There were specific themes found during each plotline. It is important for us to understand why special educators of color decide to teach, this will allow preservice educator teachers to alter the preparation programs to influence the number of special educators of color practicing in the field.

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APPENDIX A

Consent Form and/or Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Memorandum

To: Beth Cutrer
Department: BYU - EDUC - Counseling, Psychology, & Special Education
From: Sandee Aina, MPA, HRPP Associate Director
       Wayne Larsen, MAcc, IRB Administrator
Date: April 09, 2021
IRB#: IRB2021-103
Title: How Pre-Service Teachers Position Themselves as Special Educators

Brigham Young University's IRB has approved the research study referenced in the subject heading as exempt level, category 4. This study does not require an annual continuing review. Each year near the anniversary of the approval date, you will receive an email reminding you of your obligations as a researcher and to check on the status of the study. You will receive this email each year until you close the study.

The study is approved as of 04/09/2021. Please reference your assigned IRB identification number in any correspondence with the IRB.

Continued approval is conditional upon your compliance with the following requirements:

1. A copy of the approved informed consent statement can be found in iRIS. No other consent statement should be used. Each research subject must be provided with a copy or a way to access the consent statement.
2. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
3. All recruiting tools must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to use.
4. Instructions to access approved documents, submit modifications, report adverse events, can be found on the IRB website, iRIS guide: https://irb.byu.edu/iris-training-resources
5. All non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within 2 weeks of the first awareness of the problem by the PI. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some modification of study procedures, protocols, and/or informed consent processes. Such modifications require the review and approval of the IRB. Please refer to the IRB website for more information.

APPENDIX B

Plot Lines Across Participants

Prior to Elementary School

Learned to work with different cultures Going to Mom's sped classroom Impact of immigrant status of parents, and grandparents. Immigrant status and discrimination – not wanting others who are diverse to experience Siblings with disability – impact of.

Themes Noticed:

- Impact of immigrant experiences
- Impact of sibling with a disability

Elementary School

Worked with classmates with disability Struggles in school – helped to understand those who struggle Siblings with disability Playing school – but want to help those who struggle – took playing school to friends/family with disabilities to help Impact of immigrant status. Experiences with diversity Volunteering in preschools, daycares, and younger grads with individuals with disability – first experience with siblings

Themes Noticed:

- Sibling/relative Diagnosed with a disability
- Classmate had a disability
- Wanted to be a teacher, playing school, trying techniques out while playing school with siblings/relatives with disability
- Volunteering

Middle School/Jr. High

Volunteering with individuals with disabilities in clubs. Struggled in school – did not want others to struggle Worked with peers who struggled Assigned to work as helper in church to individual with a disability Siblings with a disability Different cultural interactions between own diverse culture and other diverse cultures Worked in camps with individuals with disabilities. Served as Peer mentor Served as Peer tutor - learning how with individuals with disabilities Didn't know could make a difference on people with disabilities Peer tutor, youth counselor for those with special needs gave desire to be a special educator

Themes Noticed

- Peer Mentor/tutor
- Volunteered with a club or program
- Interactions with family and peers with a disability

High School

Volunteered in Clubs with individuals with disabilities.
Hung out in SPED resource room with SPED teacher and others with disabilities.
Camp counselor for kids with special needs
TA for SPED teacher (3-5 hours week) Adaptive PE, Music and SPED class
Taught music to kiddos with disabilities
Volunteer in SPED room
Volunteer to child with disabilities
Worked with teacher who was a SPED teacher & did clubs too.
Peer tutor for SPED students.
Volunteered at camp for SPED children
Volunteered in Elementary schools
Summer camp volunteer for Special needs folks, tutored folks, TA, & baby sat for folks with disabilities
Diagnosed with mental health struggles, able to relate to others who struggle
Student council, peer tutor,
Peer tutoring
TA for SPED teacher
Peer tutor
Best Friend had a sister with a severe disability
Worked at camp for children with disabilities.
Clubs with students with disabilities.
Volunteered in a severe education classroom,
Volunteered Hippo therapy and therapeutic riding center helping those with physical and mental disabilities ride horses
Assisted with a dance class for students with disabilities
Would visit mom in classroom
 worked with those with disabilities at church
Mom is a paraeducator, spent a lot of time with those students they loved them,
Family with disability refused to believe that couldn't be taught,
Volunteered in special ed classroom at the high school
Worked at youth conference carnival had a special needs partner

Themes noticed:

- Participated in some sort of club for students with disabilities (peer tutor, summer camp, Ta, Pal's program, Best buddies, Circle R etc.)
- Volunteered in classrooms with students with disabilities (school and Church)
- Family or friend involved with special education (SPED teacher, aide, para; friends with disabilities, family with disabilities)

Post High School/Prior to Admittance

Volunteer in schools with SPED teacher
 Camp Instructor- In charge of own classroom with students with disabilities
Worked with a peer with Down Syndrome
Volunteer in resource classroom teaching literacy to kids with disabilities
Met persons with disabilities on Missions
Mission to NYC (different cultures, ESL, envisioned SPED teacher)

SPED teacher aide
Girls camp mentor for girls with special needs,
Respite worker for individuals with disability learned that folks with special needs can grow,
Felt alone with lack of diversity—want to reach out to kids who may feel isolated with disabilities.
Volunteered at pre-school weekly
Para educator for preschool disabilities
Didn't plan the path for SPED then worked with transition students as volunteer
Mission learned they love teaching individuals with disabilities
Para educator with SPED
Subbed as a para with SPED
5th grade class resource volunteer
Mission & mental health struggles= advocating for students with disabilities.
Mission- met a person with special needs, reassurance to go into SPED,
Worked as a personal care assistant to a little boy with severe disabilities (this is when they decided to study special education),
Feel that god has molded them to connect with people of various cultures because of immigrant experiences
Family members with SPED
Learned on mission loves to teach, learned to recognize culture and listen to those they are more willing to learn.
Visited moms classroom and volunteered and then decided to become a special educator.
Friends for 16 years with someone with a disability
On mission taught family with daughter with disability – wanted to be special educator
Served a mission in South America, learned the difficulties we face when we are not fully capable to communicate, importance of making goals want to teach SPED
Volunteered with SPED
Volunteered with Adaptive Aquatics and Friday kid's Respite,
Volunteer at a school for Autistic students

Themes Noticed:

- Served a mission and met someone with a disability
- Volunteered in schools
- Family, friends, friend's family with an individual with a disability

Across plotlines - Seems pattern of immigration stories of self or family. That strength helps

them want to advocate in the SPED community. Also family or close friend experiences with

individual with disability. Volunteering in SPED contexts.