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Factors Influencing Special Education Career Choices: Interplay of Personality Traits and Identity Statuses

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Abstract: Recent research has identified factors influencing the choice of a special education career; however, it has not thoroughly examined their connection with personality traits and identity status. Thus, the present study was designed to explore how different personality traits and identity statuses correlate with the motives and perceptions associated with the choice to teach in special education. The study involved 209 pre-service special education teachers. The NEO-Five Factor Inventory was used to measure the Big 5 personality traits. The Ego Identity Process Questionnaire assessed identity commitment and exploration. The Factors Influencing Teaching Choice Scale was used to evaluate motivations and perceptions about teaching. Regarding the factors that influenced the decision to pursue a career in special education, intrinsic value, shaping children's future, social equity, making social contributions, working with children, task demands, and job satisfaction were highly rated. Additionally, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and identity statuses were identified as positive predictors for certain factors influencing the choice of a teaching career in special education. Finally, the study identified two distinct groups of students: "Identity Achievers" characterized by high positive personality traits, and identity commitment, and "Identity Explorers" characterized by lower positive personality traits and higher identity exploration. Differences were observed between the groups in their motives and perceptions concerning teaching in special education. In conclusion, this study highlights the relationships between personality, identity status, and career decision factors, offering insights into the factors that influence this critical career decision among future special educators. Directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: *Career choice, identity, personality traits, special education teachers.*

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Introduction

Over the past years, the need for proficient special education teachers has continued to pose an important challenge for schools (Reeves et al., 2021). Special education teachers play a crucial role in assessing and supporting students with diverse disabilities (McLeskey et al., 2004). As the number of students accessing special education services increases (Fish, 2019), understanding someone's intention to pursue a career in special education holds significant importance (Zhang et al., 2014). However, even though most of the research studies have focused on finding factors behind the lack of special education teachers (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Peyton et al., 2021; Reeves et al., 2021), little is known regarding the intrinsic factors that shape an individual's decision to enter the field of special education.

From the limited research, career choices among special education teachers appear to be influenced by psychological factors, such as identity status and personality traits (Chen et al., 2020). The present study aimed to address this gap by providing evidence for the relationships between personality traits and identity status with the motives related to teaching in special education. In what follows, a brief review of a career in special education and its relationship with identity and personality status is presented.

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Literature Review

Career Choices of Special Education Teachers

Over the past decades, many factors for selecting a career in teaching have consistently emerged. Billingsley and Kelley (1994) suggested that teachers' decisions to maintain their jobs are shaped by external factors, employment-related factors, and individual-personal factors. External factors include variables beyond the influence of teachers, such as institutional and economic aspects, while employment factors involve teachers' professional credentials, such as prior work experiences and knowledge and specific work assignments. Personal factors encompass demographic, family-related, cognitive, and affective variables such as motivation, interests, and personality traits.

Holland (1997) proposed a theory of teachers' career choice that focuses on personality factors. According to Holland's theory, someone's career satisfaction depends on the alignment or compatibility between career-related personality traits and the work environment, known as person-environment fit. Person-environment fit arises from the alignment between an individual's attributes and the specific environment in which they aspire to be or work (Zainudin et al., 2020).

More recent models have emphasized that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are the primary categories of factors that impact teachers' decisions to select their profession. For example, the FIT-Choice model (Watt & Richardson, 2007) includes motivations of the altruistic type, which are often highlighted in teacher education literature, along with motivations that are more intrinsic and related to one's abilities. Additionally, it assesses individuals' views regarding the demands and rewards associated with the teaching profession and includes an evaluation of career satisfaction and dedication (Watt et al., 2012).

According to the international literature, the most important motivational factors affecting a person's choice to pursue a career in education are: (a) engaging with children and adolescents, (b) contributing to society, (c) seeking job stability, (d) finding satisfaction in teaching, (e) aligning with personal interests, and (f) pursuing ongoing self-education (Heinz, 2015; Watt et al., 2012). Concerning teachers' career choices, study findings from Europe, Australia, and Canada point to the desire to interact with adolescents, the opportunity for fulfillment, and the avenue to contribute socially as the most commonly cited reasons for choosing a career in teaching; conversely, studies from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, including African counties and Jamaica, highlight what are described as extrinsic motives -namely, Income, employment stability, and professional standing- as being more influential in the decision to opt for teaching as a profession (Watt et al., 2012).

Studies on factors that have a significant impact on special education teachers' career choices are limited. Prather-Jones (2011) studied the factors that teachers of students with special needs report for remaining in their job. In the interviews with these teachers, a prominent concern that emerged was the absence of substantial, concrete incentives stemming from their roles. However, these teachers derived a sense of fulfillment from their work. They managed to find satisfaction from student achievements, expressions of gratitude, and, most importantly, from their intrinsic motivation. In another study, special education teachers reported that empathy toward students and their families, and opportunities to fill job vacancies, were the most significant factors (Stephens & Fish, 2010).

Teachers' identity status and personality type, which are significant components of intrinsic factors, have been overlooked in research concerning special education. Furthermore, given that special education teachers are commonly characterized by attributes such as active engagement, dedication, empathy, self-discipline, and respectfulness, it is argued that both personality and identity status serve as fundamental traits from which their career choices can derive (Buttner et al., 2016; Prather-Jones, 2011).

Personality Traits of Special Education Teachers

Personality pertains to variances in someone's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (McCrae & John, 1992), is formed during childhood and increases throughout life (Caspi & Roberts, 2001). Personality has been recognized as one of the most significant topics in psychological research because it has been related with many aspects of life, like job satisfaction (Azucar et al., 2018; Neal et al., 2012). More specifically, the correlation between personality and career choices has been established across diverse professional domains (Buttner et al., 2016). For example, Wang et al. (2006) assumed that during career development, young individuals transition from a state of uncertainty concerning their career options toward a point of commitment to a specific choice. For this purpose, a theoretical model of personality, named the five-factor model, was employed to direct research on how personality influences specific aspects of life (Wang et al., 2006).

The Five Factor Model (FFM, Goldberg, 1990) of personality is one of the most robust systems for categorizing personality traits. The Five Factor Model provides an explanatory framework that elucidates the significance of five central personality dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience (McCrae & Costa, 2008). More specifically, *extraversion* refers to high levels of sociability, assertiveness, and talkativeness. *Agreeableness* pertains to demonstrating a willingness to collaborate and show empathy toward others, while *conscientiousness* is characterized by traits such as discipline, organization, and a strong orientation toward achievement. *Neuroticism* pertains to the level of emotional stability, anxiety, and insecurity. Finally, *agreeableness* is displayed through a higher degree of empathy and compatibility (McCrae & Costa, 2008).

The Five Factor Model has been examined within the realm of organizational behavior, especially concerning professional selection and career decision-making processes in teachers (Göncz, 2017). König and Rothland's (2012) study emphasized that characteristics such as agreeableness and conscientiousness play a crucial role in the initial choice to pursue a career in teaching, motivated by intrinsic factors like the aspiration to make a positive societal impact and a fervent enthusiasm for education. Similar findings indicate that the intrinsic value and personal utility value of teaching are positively associated with the traits of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness; conversely, these values are inversely related to neuroticism (Jugović et al., 2012; Pavin Ivanec & Defar, 2023). However, as mentioned above, little is known about the impact of personality in the field of special education.

Regarding the *Big Five Personality* traits on teachers, an examination of 43 studies involving 9,216 participants revealed a notable yet modest correlation between psychological traits and teaching effectiveness (Klassen & Tze, 2014). In addition, personality traits play a significant role in influencing different aspects of a teacher's professional life, including self-efficacy (Perera et al., 2018). Buttner et al. (2016) found that teachers' effectiveness in instructing students with special needs improves in conjunction with higher levels of extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience.

Identity Status of Special Education Teachers

Erikson (1968) characterized identity development as a psychosocial process in which individuals work on forming their identity within a broad social framework that includes family, peers, and other social groups. This process involves an individual's understanding of themselves, marked by a personal sense of consistency and continuity in different contexts and over time (Branje et al., 2021). The choices made during this critical period have long-lasting effects on a person's life. Identity is a cognitive framework concerning oneself that evolves during the adolescent stage. In Erikson's psychosocial theory, "identity achievers" are individuals who have successfully navigated the stage of identity exploration and have established a clear and coherent sense of self, while "identity explorers" are individuals who actively engage in the process of exploring their identity.

Marcia's theory (1966) provides a detailed framework for understanding career identity development through two key dimensions: exploration and commitment and classifies individuals into different identity statuses. *Exploration* is related to the process of considering various identity options, while commitment involves making decisions relevant to one's identity, as further discussed by Luyckx et al. (2006). This dynamic process, in which someone explores options and commits to them, shapes their identity, according to Branje et al. (2021). Without a fully developed identity, individuals may experience identity confusion. Marcia's model evaluates the presence or absence of exploration and commitment, leading to four identity statuses: (a) achieved, where someone made commitments; (b) moratorium, where exploration is ongoing without commitment, often seen in college students (Bartoszuk & Pittman, 2010); (c) foreclosed, where commitments are made without exploration; and (d) diffused, where there is neither exploration nor commitment.

During adolescence, one of the pivotal identities that begins to take shape is the career identity (Batool & Ghayas, 2020; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Kroger and Marcia (2011) highlight how the dimensions of identity status can differentially impact the weight of internal motives, such as personal interest and fulfillment, versus external motives, including societal expectations and financial incentives, in career choice. There is evidence suggesting that university students within the achievement and foreclosure identity statuses, where the commitment to the profession is higher compared to the moratorium and diffused statuses, demonstrated higher intrinsic values and motives compared to extrinsic motivations (Caricati et al., 2014; Mancini et al., 2015). The literature underscores the significance of identity development in educators' professional choices, emphasizing that many individuals are drawn to teaching to align their personal and professional values (Beijaard et al., 2004; Richardson & Watt, 2018).

Regarding the identity of pre-service teachers, the process of selecting and actively pursuing a career in teaching is crucial for fulfilling one's motivations and affirming self-identities (Richardson & Watt, 2018) and vice versa; motivation plays a pivotal role in the formation and evolution of a teacher's professional identity (Richardson & Watt, 2018). Studies suggest that the process of career exploration and commitment among pre-service teachers often unfolds in a manner that is neither straightforward nor linear (Hong et al., 2018). Trent (2010, 2011) suggested that teachers' identity is constantly being molded by their experiences within teacher education programs and their engagements in the school setting. In other words, the stability and coherence of teacher identities can vary, becoming more solid or more fragmented, influenced by -a variety of factors related to life events, career stages, and specific situational contexts (Day et al., 2006). In special education, in particular, literature suggests that establishing a profound connection with an individual who has a disability significantly contributes to the process of identity development (Rostami et al., 2021).

Studies highlight that a teacher's professional identity significantly shapes their professional growth, curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and commitment to the teaching field (Chen et al., 2020). In addition, as Zhang et al. (2014) pointed out, a well-defined professional identity can mitigate job burnout, enhance job satisfaction, and indicate the extent to which pre-service teachers engage in their professional training. In the context of student interactions, pre-service teachers often view themselves as distinct educators, emphasizing their evolving professional identities (Boveda & Aronson, 2019).

Identity Status and Personality of Teachers

The intricate relationship between personality traits and identity status has been a focal point of psychological research, revealing how intrinsic characteristics intertwine with one's sense of self and direction in life. Lounsbury et al. (2007) conducted a study involving more than 2,000 adolescents and found that personality traits assessed through the Big Five Inventory accounted for over 34% of the diversity in identity maturity. Traits including agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, extraversion, and emotional stability exhibited positive and statistically significant correlations with a mature and stable sense of identity. In the same direction, Luyckx et al. (2006) explored the interconnections between shifts in identity dimensions and corresponding alterations in personality traits. Their study revealed that a rise in identification with commitment was consistently associated with an increase in conscientiousness. Meanwhile, exploration was positively influenced by neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness. On the other hand, while commitment identification negatively correlated with neuroticism, it positively influenced conscientiousness, and in-depth exploration displayed a negative correlation with openness.

In a broader educational context, Klimstra et al. (2012) explored the longitudinal associations of the Big Five personality traits with identity formation among Belgian late adolescents. The study revealed that changes in these personality traits were related to changes in educational identity dimensions, highlighting the dynamic nature of personality and identity development during critical educational phases.

However, even though literature findings suggest that there is a strong interplay between personality traits and identity status, the relation of these concepts with the factors that influence teachers' career choices, especially in special education, has not been thoroughly examined.

Methodology

Research Design

Considering the points mentioned above, this study aimed to address the aforementioned gap in the literature and enhance our comprehension of how various personality traits (conscientiousness, openness to experience, neuroticism, agreeableness, and extraversion) and identity statuses are linked to the factors that affect students' choice to pursue a career in special education. More specifically, the study aimed to (a) examine the relationships between personality traits, identity status, and the factors influencing teaching choice in a sample of pre-service special education teachers, and (b) examine the differences between university students with different personality traits and identity status concerning the factors that influence their choice to follow the profession of a special educator.

On the basis of the aforementioned literature, the first hypothesis was formulated suggesting that both personality traits and identity statuses would serve as predictors for the factors motivating university students towards pursuing a career in special education teaching (*Hypothesis 1*).

In addition, drawing from pertinent research findings, it was hypothesized that students with different personality traits and identity status will present differences in the reasons that motivate their choice to become special education teachers (*Hypothesis 2*). More specifically, it was hypothesized that university students with a more mature sense of identity, high levels of positive personality traits, and low levels of neurotism would select factors associated with intrinsic motivations for opting for a career in teaching (e.g., social impact of the profession, contribution in students' lives), rather than perceptions about the teaching profession, which refer to more extrinsic factors and motives (*Hypothesis 2a*).

Conversely, university students who are in the process of exploring their identity and scored lower on positive personality traits and higher on neurotism would be more motivated by perceptions about the teaching profession and swayed by external and pragmatic factors (e.g., salary, social dissuasion, task demand and/or return) (*Hypothesis 2b*).

Sample and Data Collection

Data were obtained from 209 Greek pre-service special education teachers. The sample consisted of 185 women (88.5%) and 24 men (11.5%). Their age varied between 18 and 54 years, with a mean age of 22.11 years. (SD = 7.27). In Greece, the typical duration of studies required to become a special education teacher is 4 years. Concerning the years in university, 24 students were in the first year of their studies (11.5%), 68 students were in the second year (32.5%), 70 students were in the third year (33.5%), 38 students were in the last year (18.2%), and 9 students had extended the typical duration of their studies (4.3%). Finally, the majority of students (97.6%) were pre-service teachers (N = 204), while 5 students (2.4%) already held a bachelor's degree in general education.

Upon obtaining approval from the Committee for Research Ethics at the authors' affiliated university and ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines established by the American Psychological Association as well as compliance with the European Union Regulation regarding the handling of sensitive personal data, participants were recruited via email invitations using a web application (Google Forms), as well as through personal distribution of questionnaires at the aforementioned university. More specifically, we requested permission from the university professors to enter their classes and share information with students about the study. In instances where direct access was not feasible, we asked to distribute invitations through the Open eClass platform, an online course management system. Participants were

requested to respond to demographic inquiries before proceeding with the fundamental self-reported questionnaires. Regarding the procedure, measures were taken during data collection to guarantee the anonymity of respondents. All participants were adults who willingly consented to take part in the study and agreed to the publication of the results. The data were gathered within one month in December 2023.

Instruments

NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI)

The NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) designed by Costa and McCrae (1992) and translated into Greek by Panayiotou et al. (2004), was employed to assess personality dimensions. It consists of 60 items designed to assess five personality traits: neurotism (12 items, e.g., *I feel helpless*), openness to experience (12 items, e.g., *I am intellectually curious*), agreeableness (12 items, e.g., *I prefer cooperation*), extraversion (12 items, e.g., *I enjoy talking to people*), and conscientiousness (12 items, e.g., *I accomplish goals*). Participants express their level of agreement with each item using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

In this study, on the NEO-FFI, exploratory factor analysis performed on the NEO-FFI revealed a five-factor solution that accounted for 36.05% of the total variance. However, multiple items were removed (items 1, 3, 8, 9, 12, 18, 20, 23, 24, 27, 28, 29, 33, 34, 38, 52, 46, 47, 48, 54, 57) because they did not load on the factors properly. Similar studies conducted in adolescent populations have identified the same problem where many items from extraversion, agreeableness, and openness factors failed to discriminate to an acceptable level (Spence et al., 2012). The analysis was repeated with the remaining items resulting in a new model that explained 44.68% of the total variance. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to validate the above factorial structure, and, after allowing the residuals of specific variables to correlate (Kline, 2016), the model fi the data (χ^2 (669) = 1.493, $p < .005$, CFI = .933, IFI = .934, SRMR = .068, 90% CI [.042, .056], RMSEA = .049). The reliability of the subscales ranged from $\alpha = .71$ to $\alpha = .83$.

Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ-SF)

The Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ-SF, Balistreri et al., 1995) translated and adapted in Greek by Chrysafoudi and Platsidou (2016) was used to examine the identity process statuses. In its short form (Diamantopoulou & Platsidou, 2021), it comprises 12 items, of which 6 items refer to identity commitment (e.g., *I have definitely decided on the occupation I want to pursue*, 12 items assess the Discrepancy (e.g., *I have considered different political views thoughtfully*), and 6 items refer to identity exploration (e.g., *Neatness is important to me*). Participants are asked to rate their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 5 indicates "strongly agree."

In this study, exploratory factor analysis unveiled a two-factor solution explaining 58.31% of the total variance, aligning with the factorial structure suggested by its developers. Confirmatory factor analysis validated this model structure (χ^2 (45) = 1.104, $p < .005$, CFI = .986, IFI = .987, SRMR = .045, 90% CI [.012, .053], RMSEA = .022). The reliability of the factors was found $\alpha = .73$ for the identity exploration subscale and $\alpha = .72$ for the identity commitment subscale.

Factors Influencing Teaching Choice Scale (FIT-Choice)

The Factors Influencing Teaching Choice Scale (FIT-Choice, Watt & Richardson, 2007) was designed to evaluate the main motivations when pursuing a teaching career. Since it was the first time used in Greek samples, the scale underwent translation from English to Greek and subsequent back-translation from bilingual researchers. In its original form, it consists of 57 items that assess two main dimensions: motivations for teaching and perceptions about teaching. Watt et al. (2012) tested the scale in different cultural samples and concluded that 13 items (B8, B22, B45, B11, B35, B48, B4, B18, B7, B53, B54, C15, C5) are not culturally invariant and, thus, could be omitted. Therefore, we chose to use the remaining 44 items of the scale.

In the FIT-Choice instrument, various motivational factors are assessed through multiple-item indicators, where respondents rate their importance on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important). All motivation items on the scale begin with the preface "*I chose to become a teacher because.*". Participants are also asked to express their level of agreement with various statements about the teaching profession, using a scale that ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely) (preface: "*For each question below, please rate the extent to which it is true for you*"). These statements collectively covered factors assessing participants' perceptions of teaching in terms of task demand (expert career, high demand) and task return (social status, salary). Finally, career choice satisfaction was gauged using two items, and participants provided ratings on the extent to which they experienced social dissuasion regarding their choice to pursue a teaching career.

Taking into consideration that it was the first time the FIT-Choice was used in the Greek sample, we performed separate exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses for motivations and perceptions, satisfaction, and social dissuasion since the items on each dimension have different formulations and wordings. Regarding the motives, the factor solution was found slightly different from the one suggested by its creators. More specifically, exploratory analysis revealed nine factors that explained 78.56% of the total variance. After removing items 3 and 16, which did not load on the factors

properly, the analysis was repeated. The final model accounted for 83.45% of the total variance, and confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that the model adequately fit the data (χ^2 (458) = 2.104, p < .005, CFI = .935, IFI = .938, SRMR = .056, 90% CI [.032, .063], RMSEA = .056). The reliability of the factors was found satisfactory (see Table 1). Similarly, regarding perceptions, the factor solution was found different from the one suggested by its creators. Exploratory analysis revealed four factors explaining the 78.56% of the total variance. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to assess the fit of the final model, demonstrating adequately fit to the data (χ^2 (296) = 1.854, p < .005, CFI = .941, IFI = .946, SRMR = .051, 90% CI [.039, .058], RMSEA = .064). The reliability of the factors was found to be satisfactory (see Table 2).

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Reliability of the FIT-Choice (Motives)

	Factors								
	Work with children/ adolescents	**Shape future of children & enhance social equity**	**Social influences**	**Job security**	**Prior T/L experience**	**Time for family**	**Perceived teaching abilities**	**Intrinsic value**	**Make social contribution**
E19	.883								
E20	.880								
E21	.860								
E14		.883							
E15		.857							
E13		.771							
E12		.641							
E26			.899						
E25			.898						
E27			.885						
E7				.883					
E8				.842					
E6				.817					
E23					.874				
E22					.863				
E24					.832				
E10						.839			
E11						.837			
E9						.798			
E1							.887		
E2							.854		
E4								.769	
E5								.765	
E17									.775
E18									.757
Cronbach's α	.95	.86	.92	.89	.77	.85	.84	.93	.73
Factor Correlations									
Correlations between factors ranged from .158** to .613** (**$p < .001$)									

Table 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Reliability of the FIT-Choice (Perceptions, Satisfaction and Social Dissuasion)

	Factors			
	Task return (perceptions)	**Task demand (perceptions)**	**Satisfaction**	**Social dissuasion**
E36	.847			
E38	.815			
E37	.795			
E39	.780			
E34	.779			
E35	.629			
E33	.597			
E30		.814		
E32		.751		
E29		.738		
E28		.710		
E31		.495		
E44			.947	
E43			.943	
E42				.795
E41				.694
E40				.636
Cronbach's α	.87	.74	.96	.69
	Factor Correlations			
	1-2		.142*	
	2-3		.217**	
	3-4		-.154*	

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

Analyzing of Data

Descriptive and intercorrelation analyses were initially performed using the statistical package SPSS (version 26). These analyses included calculations of means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis values, and correlations. The analyses aimed to explore the interrelationships among the variables under investigation and assess the appropriateness of employing parametric analyses with the dataset.

Subsequently, a hierarchical clustering method was used to identify clusters of participants exhibiting similar personality traits and identity process statuses. Taking into consideration literature emphasizing a significant correlation between mature identity and positive personality traits (Lounsbury et al., 2007; Marinković & Borović, 2022), cluster analysis was employed to categorize adolescents based on their level of identity maturity, with the underlying objective of pinpointing students whose personality traits might predispose them to either successful or unsuccessful adaptation to identity-related challenges. Cluster centroids were determined based on the Ward density method considering the Euclidean distance between cases. A non-hierarchical K-means cluster analysis yielded two distinct clusters. K-means analysis assumes that clusters are spherical and of similar size and can be more robust to outliers compared to hierarchical clustering (Ikotun et al., 2023). It is important to note that there is not a universally accepted statistical method for determining clusters. The number of clusters was determined by considering a) the distance between cluster centroids, b) the number of participants in each cluster, and c) the statistically significant differences revealed by one-way analysis of variance (Sugar & James, 2003). As presented in the results, two clusters were identified.

To test hypothesis 1, we performed a series of regression analyses to examine whether the personality traits (conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness, neurotism, and extraversion) and the identity statuses (commitment and exploration) influence students' decision to pursue a career as a special educator. Finally, to test hypotheses 2a and 2b, a series of Univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were applied to check whether the two clusters emerged demonstrated differences related to their motivations for teaching and their perceptions about teaching.

Results

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Personality Dimensions, Identity Status, and the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice

Before checking the aims of the study, we first performed preliminary analyses concerning the means and standard deviations of the factors that emerged from the analyses and the correlations between the variables.

Regarding the personality dimensions, the results showed that the students scored higher on positive personality traits (e.g., agreeableness, extraversion) and lower on negative traits (neurotism). Regarding their identity status, students scored higher on the identity commitment factor on identity exploration. Finally, regarding teaching career choice reasons, students assessed higher reasons concerning the factors of intrinsic value, shaping future and social equity, making social contributions, and working with children and adolescents from the motives dimension and the task demand and satisfaction factors from the perception dimension (Table 3).

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, Skewness and Kurtosis of Personality Dimensions, Identity Status and the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice

Factors	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
NEO-FFI[a]				
Neurotism	3.09	.71	.22	-.07
Extraversion	3.50	.67	-.02	-.46
Openness to experience	3.44	.93	-.20	-.81
Agreeableness	3.94	.64	-.85	.89
Conscientiousness	3.85	.64	-.50	-.33
EIPQ-SF[b]				
Identity exploration	4.25	.83	-.25	-.03
Identity commitment	4.35	.79	-.36	.56
FIT-Choice (Motives)[c]				
Perceived teaching abilities	5.24	1.22	-.45	-.26
Intrinsic value	5.72	1.41	-1.24	1.13
Job security	4.93	1.41	-.56	-.12
Time for family	4.92	1.43	-.57	.01
Shape future and social equity	5.83	1.07	-1.11	1.66
Make social contribution	5.56	1.20	-.72	.21
Work with children and adolescents	5.91	1.21	-1.14	1.12
Prior teaching/learning experiences	5.12	1.49	-.75	-.16
Social Influences	4.72	1.76	-.70	-.49
FIT-Choice (Perceptions)[c]				
Task demand	5.74	.89	-.75	.29
Task return	4.12	1.19	-.16	-.26
Social dissuasion	4.40	1.40	-.17	-.54
Satisfaction	5.95	1.35	-.11	.81

Note. [a]1-5 Likert scale, [b]1-6 Likert scale, [c]1-7 Likert scale

In the next step, we initially considered the correlations between the examined variables (Table 4). The results indicated low and medium correlations between some factors.

Table 4. Correlations Between Personality Dimensions, Identity Status and the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice

Factors	Neurotism	Extraversion	Openness to experience	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Perceived teaching abilities	Intrinsic value	Job security	Time for family	Shape future and social equity	Make social contribution	Work with children and adolescents	Prior teaching learning experiences	Social Influences	Task demand	Task return	Social dissuasion	Satisfaction	Identity exploration
Extraversion	-.193**																		
Openness to experience	-.071	.339**																	
Agreeableness	-.127	.095	.062																
Conscientiousness	-.444**	.259**	.174*	.090															
Perceived teaching abilities	-.097	.351**	.238**	-.027	.278**														
Intrinsic value	-.059	.264**	.056	.141*	.223**	.457**													
Job security	-.109	.101	-.070	.012	.175*	.272**	.318**												
Time for family	.023	.038	-.019	-.022	.060	.148*	.103	.527**											
Shape future and social equity	-.024	.214**	.235**	.132	.164*	.220**	.288**	.261**	.291**										
Make social contribution	-.080	.179**	.240**	.115	.194**	.194**	.359**	.223**	.192**	.558**									
Work with children and adolescents	.021	.145*	.021	.159*	.137*	.276**	.613**	.252**	.210**	.400**	.451**								
Prior teaching learning experiences	-.056	.032	-.036	.135	.077	.120	.293**	.142*	.103	.198**	.365**	.305**							
Social Influences	-.001	.053	-.069	.010	.188**	.154*	.338**	.260**	.201**	.169*	.239**	.370**	.252**						
Task demand	.048	.002	-.087	-.033	.115	.049	.144*	.134	.010	.268**	.209**	.192**	.214**	.082					
Task return	-.029	-.055	-.143*	-.005	.075	.008	.150*	.401**	.217**	.106	.076	.120	.170*	.309**	.142*				
Social dissuasion	.176*	.090	.152*	-.090	-.165*	-.040	-.134	-.166*	.067	.017	.062	.031	.043	-.023	-.077	-.085			
Satisfaction	-.129	.236**	-.049	.105	.324**	.376**	.649**	.287**	.184**	.369**	.331**	.641**	.290**	.359**	.217**	.093	-.154*		
Identity exploration	.090	.277**	.475**	-.081	.133	.275**	.068	.023	.102	.236**	.155*	.074	-.031	-.033	-.033	.005	.187**	.047	
Identity commitment	-.250**	-.004	.176*	.048	.303**	.267**	.189**	.185**	-.004	.093	.174*	.096	.062	.071	.055	.025	-.103	.260**	.247**

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

The Effect of Personality Traits and Identity Status on the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice

The first aim of the study was to examine whether and how personality traits and identity status affect the factors influencing teaching choice. A series of regression analyses were performed, where the independent variables were the personality traits and the identity status and the dependent variables were the factors influencing teaching choice. The analyses were controlled for the effect of the demographic variables (gender and age). Regarding the personality traits, the results indicated that openness to experience, extraversion, and conscientiousness had a small positive effect on some factors influencing teaching choice, whereas neurotism and agreeableness did not predict any factors. With respect to identity status, a small effect was found for both identity commitment and identity exploration on the same factors predicted by personality traits. Note that perceived teaching abilities was the only factor to be predicted by both personality traits and identity status (Table 5). To illustrate, students' perceptions of their teaching abilities are influenced by a combination of their inherent personality traits and their sense of commitment to the teaching profession.

Table 5. Regression analyses of identity status and personality characteristics predicting the factors influencing teaching choice

Models	**β**	***SE***	***t***	***p***
Model 1: Openness to experience				
$F(13, 208) = 4.445$, $p < .000$, $R = .478$, $R^2 = .229$				
Perceived teaching abilities	.24	.06	3.59	.000
Shape future and social equity	.20	.07	2.77	.006
Make social contribution	.17	.06	2.65	.009
Model 2: Extraversion				
$F(13, 208) = 3.532$, $p < .000$, $R = .437$, $R^2 = .191$				
Perceived teaching abilities	.14	.04	3.38	.001
Social dissuasion	.16	.03	2.05	.041
Model 3: Conscientiousness				
$F(13, 208) = 3.386$, $p < .000$, $R = .429$, $R^2 = .184$				
Perceived teaching abilities	.10	.04	2.54	.012
Satisfaction	.14	.04	3.02	.003
Model 4: Identity exploration				
$F(13, 208) = 3.242$, $p < .000$, $R = .422$, $R^2 = .178$				
Perceived teaching abilities	.20	.05	3.87	.000
Shape future and social equity	.16	.07	2.44	.016
Social dissuasion	.10	.04	2.46	.015
Model 5: Identity commitment				
$F(13, 208) = 2.716$, $p < .002$, $R = .392$, $R^2 = .153$				
Perceived teaching abilities	.12	.05	2.47	.014
Make social contribution	.17	.06	2.03	.044
Satisfaction	.16	.06	2.75	.006

Types of students regarding their personality traits and identity status

As outlined in the theoretical framework, existing literature indicates a robust connection between an individual's identity status and their personality traits. Taking the above into consideration and in order to examine the second aim of the study, we initially used the hierarchical clustering method to find groups of participants with similar personality traits and identity statuses. The analysis, which involved cluster centroids determined using the Ward density method and Euclidean distance, showed that two clusters were the best fit, consistent with findings in related studies (Marinković & Borović, 2022). Cluster 1 (N = 109) was named “Identity achievers” because it included those students who reported high identity commitment and identity exploration. Concerning the personality traits, the standard trend within this cluster was medium neurotism and openness to experience and high extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Cluster 2 (N = 100) involved those students who scored lower in identity commitment and higher in identity exploration compared to Cluster 1. This group was named “Identity explorers” and, regarding their personality traits, they reported higher levels of neurotism and openness to experience and lower levels of extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The final cluster centroids are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6. Final Cluster Centers (Means)

	Cluster 1 Identity achievers (N = 109)	**Cluster 2** Identity explorers (N = 100)	F (2,207)
Neurotism	2.98	3.21	5.117*
Extraversion	3.78	3.20	46.395**
Openness to experience	2.69	4.13	299.057**
Agreeableness	4.01	3.86	3.064
Conscientiousness	4.05	3.63	24.593**
Identity exploration	4.12	4.84	74.501**
Identity commitment	4.54	3.50	14.232**

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

Differences between "Identity Achievers" and "Identity Explorers" on Factors Influencing Teaching Choice

Finally, a series of one-way ANOVA analyses were applied to test whether "identity achievers" and "identity explorers" differ in the factors that influence their choice to become teachers. Some interesting results were obtained, confirming the hypothesis. A statistically significant difference was found between the two groups in perceived teaching abilities (F (1, 208) = 14.497, $p \leq .001$). More specifically, the analysis indicated that "identity achievers" assessed their teaching abilities (M = 5.54, SD = 1.16) as a factor that influenced their choice to become teachers higher than "identity explorers" (M = 4.19, SD = 1.12), indicating that students who have a stronger sense of identity commitment may have greater confidence in their teaching abilities and may be more motivated to pursue a career in special education.

Statistically significant differences were also found in the shape of future and social equity (F (1, 208) = 11.322, $p \leq .001$) and social contribution (F (1, 208) = 19.124, $p \leq .000$) factors. "Identity achievers" (M = 6.11, SD = 1.01 and M = 5.92, SD = 1.10 respectively) scored higher in their beliefs of shaping the future by promoting social equity and actively making meaningful social contributions as factors influencing the teaching career choice compared to "identity explorers" (M = 5.57, SD = 1.09 and M = 5.18, SD = 1.21 respectively). Students who have a stronger identity commitment may have a greater purpose and motivation to make a positive impact through their teaching career.

Finally, a statistically significant difference between the two groups in task return was found (F (1, 208) = 4.422, p = .048). In this case, "identity explorers" assessed higher (M = 4.56, SD = 1.19) factors such as social status and salary in their choice to become teachers compared to "identity achievers" (M = 3.97, SD = 1.21).

Discussion

The present study focuses on examining the interplay between personality traits, identity status, and the factors that influence individuals' decisions to pursue a career in special education, specifically among pre-service special education teachers in Greece. Notably, this demographic has received limited attention in previous research, making this study's focus particularly novel and valuable for understanding the dynamics of career choice in this field. In addition, although international literature has identified factors influencing special education career choices (e.g., Neeraj & Ahmad, 2020; Reeves, 2018), research has not extensively explored their correlation with personality traits and identity status. Thus, this aimed to address this gap.

Factors Influencing the Teaching Choice of Special Education Teachers

Regarding the prevalent factors that contribute to the choice of a teaching career in special education, the study's findings indicated that intrinsic value, shaping children's future, social equity, making social contributions, working with children, task demands, and job satisfaction were the most highly rated factors among pre-service special education teachers. These findings can be discussed in the context of several key psychological and educational theories.

According to the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), intrinsic motivation arises from doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable. Intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in career choice, especially in professions such as teaching. In the decision to pursue a teaching career, intrinsic motivation holds a pivotal position and serves as a more accurate indicator of enthusiasm and personal development than career dissatisfaction (Hennessy & Lynch, 2017; Stellmacher et al., 2020). Teachers hold a critical role in influencing children's lives, making this a significant motivational factor. The desire to shape children's future corresponds to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, specifically the stage of generativity versus stagnation. Individuals in this stage seek to guide the next generation and leave a lasting impact (Erikson, 1950). Teaching, mainly in special education, often requires a deep personal commitment and passion, as the rewards are more psychological and emotional than financial. In this context, although studies on undergraduate students of other professions (e.g., medicine, business management, computer science) report factors such as economic considerations, social influences (e.g., media), parental income, and job security influencing their career choice (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018), it appears that special education students are motivated by intrinsic factors and their values and beliefs, such as shaping children's future, social equity, and making social contributions.

Findings suggest that special education instructors demonstrate significant intrinsic motivation, drawing inspiration from aspects such as pleasure, recognition, curiosity, and feelings of achievement, whereas extrinsic motivation among these educators appears to be comparatively lower, affected by factors such as scarce chances for advancement, modest income levels, constrained facility access, and concerns regarding job stability (Yasmeen et al., 2019). In addition, teachers who enjoy working with children are likely to find great satisfaction in witnessing their students' growth and development, which aligns with the theory of intrinsic motivation (Crişan et al., 2018; Daniilidou, 2023). Finally, social equity and making social contributions as motivational factors can be understood through the humanistic perspective in psychology and social justice education. Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that beyond personal needs, individuals seek self-actualization, which often involves contributing to others' welfare (Maslow, 1943). Special education teachers, in particular, often view their role as agents of change, striving to create an equitable learning environment for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities (Daniilidou, 2023; Drame et al., 2022).

Regarding the perceptions about teaching, pre-service teachers assessed the task demand factor (expert career and hard work) higher than the task return factor (social status and salary). At the same time, they also reported a relatively high level of satisfaction with their decision to pursue this profession. High ratings for task demand suggest that pre-service teachers acknowledge and are prepared for the challenges of the teaching profession. This is further supported by the participation of Greek pre-service teachers in attending and co-teaching at schools (practicum) which offers the opportunity to explore the duties and obligations of special educators, resulting in a feeling of professional self-efficacy and a favorable view of students with disabilities and their families (Tzivinikou & Kagkara, 2019).

In conclusion, teachers who enter the profession with a clear understanding of the considerable demands it entails, actively have access to necessary resources, and derive satisfaction from their work are more adept at managing stress and mitigating the risk of burnout (Granziera et al., 2021; Langher et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2019). This state of readiness contributes to a more resilient outlook when facing the rigors of teaching, fostering a sense of competence and achievement. Integrating this evidence with the previously mentioned results of our present study, which suggest that the factors motivating pre-service teachers to pursue a career in special education are predominantly intrinsic, we can explain why in-service special education teachers often emphasize their love for the profession and the children they teach, the emotional fulfillment they derive from their work, and their belief in their capacity to enhance their students' quality of life as the most significant protective resilience factors (Daniilidou, 2023).

The Effect of Personality Traits and Identity Status on Teaching Career Choice

The first aim of the study was to examine the relations between personality traits, identity status, and the determinants impacting the decision to pursue a career in special education. Findings revealed that three positive personality traits (conscientiousness, openness to experience, extraversion) and both identity statuses, were predictors of factors influencing teachers' choice to enter the field of special education.

As mentioned above, international literature has highlighted the role of the different personality traits in career decision -making. Studies have found that personality affects career decision-making self-efficacy (e.g., Sharma & Suri, 2019; Wu et al., 2020; Zulkifli et al., 2021). In choosing a teaching career in particular, the literature findings agree with the results of the present study, indicating that personality traits are more effective predictors of intrinsic motivation (e.g., perceived teaching abilities, making social contribution) than extrinsic motivation (e.g., salary, social status). In other words, personality traits are stronger predictors of intrinsic motivation, such as perceived teaching capabilities and social contribution, than extrinsic motivators such as salary and social status.

Specifically, the literature suggests that the interpersonal dimensions of extraversion and agreeableness play a significant role in predicting not only the intrinsic value placed on a career but also the level of satisfaction with the choice of that profession (Jugović et al., 2012; Tomšik & Gatial, 2018). Research by König and Rothland (2012) highlighted that factors such as agreeableness and conscientiousness are pivotal in the initial decision to enter the teaching field, driven by intrinsic motivations such as the desire to contribute positively to society and a passion for education. Although the literature regarding the relationship between personality traits and the factors concerning special education career choices is rather limited, special educators frequently emphasize the significance of individual traits, such as the alignment between their personality and the job's requirements (Prather-Jones, 2011). Finally, while agreeableness and neuroticism are important personality traits that can impact various aspects of a teacher's professional life, such as self-efficacy (Perera et al., 2018), in the present study, they did not predict any of the motivations and/or perceptions to pursue a career in teaching. It seems that the motivation behind selecting a career in special education is primarily associated with intrinsic factors such as personal teaching skills, social impact, and resonance with educational objectives and values.

Regarding pre-service teachers' identity, choosing and diligently engaging in a teaching career is essential for realizing one's motivations and solidifying self-identities (Richardson & Watt, 2018). Indeed, the journey of career exploration and commitment for pre-service teachers typically progresses in a complex and not strictly sequential manner (Hong et al., 2018). This interchange between identity exploration and commitment allows individuals to align their personal values and beliefs with their professional choices, as highlighted by Kroger and Marcia (2011), explaining why both identity

exploration and identity commitment positively predict intrinsic motives. It is worth noting that identity exploration was found to predict social dissuasion, while identity commitment was found to predict satisfaction from the choice to become a teacher.

Identity exploration involves evaluating various career paths and personal goals, often leading to social dissuasion due to the influence of others' opinions and expectations. Studies' findings revealed that immediate contexts (such as family, peers, and former teachers) and distal contexts (like societal perceptions of the teaching profession) influence pre-service teachers and affect their motivation to enter the teaching field, their process of exploring this career path, and ultimately, the formation and solidification of their commitment to teaching (Hong et al., 2018). Conversely, identity commitment, which entails a firm decision and dedication to a chosen career, correlates with higher satisfaction from that choice. Kroger and Marcia (2011) emphasize that individuals who commit to a profession such as teaching, typically after a period of exploration, are more likely to feel fulfilled and content, having aligned their personal and professional identities. This commitment results from informed decision-making, leading to confidence in their career choice.

Before proceeding to the next aim of the study, it is important to address two significant findings from the present study. First, it was found that while personality traits and identity statuses are pivotal in guiding the initial career choice, their impact is less pronounced in shaping teachers' ongoing perceptions and attitudes toward their profession. As discussed by Watt and Richardson (2008), once individuals begin their teaching careers, their perceptions of the profession are more fluidly influenced by external factors such as the educational environment, policy changes, and interactions with students. These perceptions are more likely to be shaped by the realities and experiences encountered in the daily practice of teaching.

Second, the only factor predicted by both personality traits and identity statuses was perceived teaching abilities. Personality traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness, significantly influence teachers' perceived abilities by enhancing skills crucial for effective teaching, such as empathy and organizational capabilities (Djigić et al., 2014; Jugović et al., 2012). Additionally, identity statuses involving exploration and commitment, are key in developing a teacher's professional identity and self-efficacy (Marschall, 2022). Teachers who engage in exploring various teaching methods and are committed to their educational philosophies tend to have a stronger sense of their teaching competencies.

Personality Traits and Identity Status Differences in Teaching Career Choice

The second aim of the study concerned the examination of the differences between university students with different personality traits and identity statuses concerning the factors that influence their choice to pursue a career in special education. Two distinct clusters of students were identified: "identity achievers" and "identity explorers". "Identity achievers" exhibited higher levels of identity commitment and exploration, suggesting stronger clarity and confidence in their career choice (Hong et al., 2018). This group also scored higher on positive personality traits, including extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. In contrast, "identity explorers", characterized by higher identity exploration and lower commitment levels, showed higher neuroticism and openness to experience but scored lower on positive traits.

The study's findings align with existing literature emphasizing a significant correlation between mature identity and positive personality traits (Lounsbury et al., 2007; Marinković & Borović, 2022). More specifically, the present study provides important insights into the differences between "identity achievers" and "identity explorers" concerning the factors that motivate their choice to pursue a career in special education. To illustrate, "identity achievers" assessed the factors related to teaching abilities, shape future and social equity, and make social contribution higher compared to "identity explorers". The differences in these assessments can be understood as reflections of the developmental stages of identity formation. Identity achievers, having successfully navigated their identity crises, exhibit greater assurance in their societal roles and contributions. Conversely, identity explorers are still actively engaged in the exploration of these commitments. This exploration phase is characterized by a search for options and a less stable commitment to specific roles and ideologies (Garner & Kaplan, 2019).

On the other hand, "identity explorers" assessed factors such as social status and salary in their choice to become teachers higher compared to "identity achievers". The exploration phase in identity formation is often marked by external influences and a search for tangible rewards and recognition (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Consequently, explorers may be more influenced by external factors such as social status and salary, viewing them as immediate and measurable indicators of success and societal approval. In contrast, identity achievers have passed the exploration phase and made definitive commitments, including career choices. Their decisions are more likely to be guided by intrinsic motivations and personal values.

Conclusion

This study investigates how personality traits and identity status intersect with factors influencing career choice among pre-service special education teachers. Findings emphasize the significance of intrinsic motivations, such as shaping children's futures and social equity, in driving individuals towards special education careers. Personality traits such as openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness, along with identity exploration and commitment, predict various aspects

of career choice. Differences in personality traits and identity statuses reflect varying priorities in career decision-making, with achievers focusing on intrinsic motivations. Overall, the study underscores the complex interplay between individual characteristics and external influences in guiding vocational choices among special education teachers.

Recommendations

The findings of the present study hold significance; although previous research indicates that both identity status and personality traits might affect career decisions, only a limited number of studies have explored intrinsic factors within the realm of special education careers. By understanding how different personality traits and identity statuses influence career decisions, educational institutions can better support and empower pre-service special educators.

In this context, the present study broadens our understanding of how personality traits and identity status interact to influence the career choices of pre-service special education teachers, suggesting that a mature identity along with positive personality traits might be particularly crucial in this field due to its demanding and emotionally charged nature. The implications of these findings are significant for teacher training and recruitment. The clear distinction between "identity achievers" and "identity explorers" could be used to tailor recruitment strategies and educational programs. For example, programs could be designed to support "identity explorers" in developing a stronger sense of professional identity, potentially increasing their commitment and reducing attrition rates in the profession. In addition, the positive correlation between certain personality traits (like conscientiousness and extraversion) and the decision to become a special education teacher underlines the need for personality assessments in teacher training programs. Empirical research aimed at supporting the development of identity among adolescents and young adults reveals that interventions must be tailored to individuals' specific identity statuses to effectively foster growth (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Such assessments could help guide students towards specializations where their inherent traits could be best used.

Finally, the results highlight the need to revise and update current curricula to foster pre-service teachers' exploration of their professional identities within the realm of special education. This might entail incorporating activities like reflective writing exercises, establishing mentorship initiatives with experienced special education educators, and providing active involvement in various special education environments to assist pre-service teachers in clarifying their values, beliefs, and career aspirations.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, it also has limitations. The sample, primarily female and from a single cultural context, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could replicate this study in different cultural contexts and with a more balanced gender distribution to validate and extend these findings. Another limitation is the study's reliance on self-reported measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias (Brutus et al., 2013). Future research might incorporate more objective measures, such as observational data or peer assessments, to corroborate these findings. Ultimately, the findings of this study were derived from cross-sectional data, which allowed for the reporting of associations between personality traits, identity statuses, and factors influencing the choice to teach. However, this approach does not establish causal relationships. Future research employing longitudinal studies, with repeated observations of the variables in question, could address these limitations and potentially reveal causal links.

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