



Career choice among academically excellent students: Choosing teaching career as a corrective experience

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Early childhood experiences may affect career choice in adulthood.
- Academically excellent college students choose a career in teaching as a corrective experience.
- Teaching enables teachers to compensate for painful early experiences in various ways.
- Discussing reasons for career choice could help raise awareness of implicit career motivations.

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined implicit motivations of academically excellent students' choice of teaching careers rather than more prestigious occupations. Open, in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve students. Findings indicate that choosing a career in teaching served as a corrective experience for painful past experiences, and revealed four types of implicit motivations: (1) The experience of helplessness and the need to strengthen the sense of self-efficacy (2) The search for interpersonal boundaries as markers of identity (3) The need to belong: Warmth, caring, and individual attention and (4) Compensation for an unjust and humiliating experience in childhood.

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1. Introduction

Research supports the assumption that the quality of the teachers positively affects student achievements (e.g., Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014; National Research Council, 2000; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Harris & Sass, 2011; National Research; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). While high quality of teachers may consist of many characteristics. However, recruiting academically excellent teachers is difficult due to the low income, work load and teaching status (Kirchhoff & Lawrenz, 2011). Furthermore, many of those who start out with a special program for academically excellent students end up abandoning their studies, either in the first couple of years or at the end of the program, in favor of other professions (Noble & Dowling, 2007). Thus, this research set

out to explore what motivates students who demonstrate academic excellence to choose a profession in education. We were particularly interested in understanding why students with high achievements, including those who previously chose a career with high financial rewards or prestige, decided to change their course of studies and choose teaching as a career.

Many studies on career choice tend to focus on motivations such as desire to work with children (Heinz, 2015; Jarvis & Woodrow, 2005; Jugović, Marušić, Pavin Ivanec, & Vizek Vidović, 2012); financial reward and time for family (Richardson & Watt, 2005).

The present study suggests an additional motive for choosing a career in teaching among academically excellent students – that choosing a teaching career serves as a corrective experience for prior painful life events. Expanding our understanding of motivations that will attract academically excellent people who are looking for a profession that will enable them to develop their personality and provide them with self-actualization.

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This introduction will begin with a brief summary of the research regarding teaching as a career choice in general and then more specifically by high achievement students.

1.1. *Teaching as a career choice*

There is an extensive literature regarding the motivations for choosing teaching as a career among students. Usually, researchers tend to attribute their motivations to one of the two following main categories (Anthony & Ord, 2008; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Heinz, 2015; Watt et al., 2012):

1. Extrinsic motivations, such as reasons related to the benefits the teacher can gain from the profession of teaching, such as salary, a stable income, status and prestige, convenient working hours and vacations, or a leverage to other jobs. Thus, for example, researchers who focused on the social advantages (Klassen, Al-Dhafri, Hannok, & Betts, 2011; Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Mau, 2000) found that social and cultural contexts can have a substantial influence on students' motivations when choosing teaching as a career.
2. Friedman (2016) found that students in elementary education teacher training programs revealed an intricate array of intrinsic motivations for choosing a teaching career, combining different types of altruistic and narcissistic expectations of their role as future teachers, including genuine narcissism, benevolent narcissism, genuine altruism, and paternalistic altruism. Additional categories of intrinsic motivations may include natural abilities and propensities, as well as choosing teaching as a corrective experience for personal hardships endured earlier in life.

Altruistic motivations may include the desire to help children and/or adolescents, the passion to share acquired knowledge, and the drive to become an agent of social change for the benefit of the community (Kass & Miller, 2011). Sometimes, these altruistic motivations developed from hardships endured earlier in life. For example, students of ethnic minorities; students from families living in disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions; people who experienced language difficulties or those who were themselves subject to a negative educational experience in school, considered themselves agents of social change (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Kass & Miller, 2011; McCarty & Bia, 2002).

Narcissistic motivations may include perceiving teaching as a profession that enables lifelong development providing self-actualization, and a sense of purpose and mission (Ezer, Gilat, & Sagee, 2010; Katzin & Shkedi, 2011).

Natural abilities and propensities comprise of natural affinity for teaching, a love of children, enjoyment, a sense of duty and responsibility associated with the role of teacher, leadership abilities, academic skills, and an intellectual challenge (Coulthard & Kyriacou, 2002; Heinz, 2015). Using one's personal narrative as a means to understanding career choice and later career construction, echoes recent developments in career development theories, specifically Savickas' theory (2005, 2012).

1.2. *Choosing teaching as a corrective experience for personal hardships endured earlier in life*

Attachment, childhood experiences and family history may have a major influence on career choices (Paloş & Drobot, 2010; Wright & Perrone, 2008). People choose an occupation that enables them to replicate significant childhood experiences and satisfy needs that were unfulfilled in their childhood (Obholzer & Roberts, 1997). Such career choices may enable them to reconstruct significant

childhood memories, to satisfy unrealized childhood desires. Indeed, some researchers found, the choice of a teaching career is rooted in the personal life story of the teachers (Costigan, Crocco, & Zumwalt, 2004; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Lavian, 2014; Levin, 2003). Pines (2002) reviewed motivations for choosing a teaching career, and found that the emergence of reasons related to painful childhood experiences and memories, such as the experience of loneliness, living under imminent danger, experiencing fear and anxiety, as well as experiences of humiliation and helplessness. Kass (2012) examined the development of sense of teachers' professional efficacy. Teachers' low sense of efficacy started developing during their childhood, and was heavily influenced by their parents, the authority figures at home. When they started working in schools, they expected that the principal (the authority figure at work), would enable them to experience at work a sense of compensation for the lack of support for their emerging sense of self-efficacy that they did not receive at home.

However, those motivations, as far as we know, were not evaluated among the unique group of academically excellent students, a highly desirable group for the teaching profession. Since academically excellent students can choose from a variety of professions, it is of interest to explore their unique motivations for career choice in education and hopefully use this understanding to attract academically excellent students to the education profession.

1.3. *Academically excellent students' choice of a teaching career*

There are programs for academically excellent students in many academic fields, and they serve the important function of imparting knowledge and training students with high achievements. Despite the obvious advantages of attracting high quality candidates to study teaching, programs for academically excellent students are not commonly found in teacher training institutions, although some countries (e.g., Singapore, Finland and South Korea) make a deliberate and exceptional effort to recruit academically excellent students for teaching (Auguste, Kihn, & Miller, 2010). Special programs that compete for academically excellent candidates with advanced degrees, such as 'Teach for America', enable students to work as teachers after a brief training period of a few months. However, programs such as these do not manage to fulfill their overall goal, as it appears that many of these teachers choose to leave the profession after a few years (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Vasquez Heilig, 2005; Donaldson & Moore Johnson, 2011).

In their attempts to attract highly capable and promising students to join the profession, some teacher training institutions offer these students a program with numerous advantages, such as extended scholarships, a small number of students per class, working with uniquely highly ranked lecturers, and personal mentoring for each student throughout the course of studies. The special study tracks designed for this population address students' needs on various levels. The need to engage students in a challenging, high quality program of studies is addressed by offering an extensive curriculum with many electives and enrichment courses, as well as requisite project courses that involve empirical research, thus providing students the chance to work on problem-solving and to engage in philosophical discussions. In terms of students' personal development, the design of the program for academically excellent students is such that it enables them to enhance and hone their skills in the company of peers, which in turn encourages meaningful social relationships. In addition, students have the opportunity to improve their leadership skills through participation in academic activities, to acquire practical experiences in the field, and to develop independent thinking (Howley et al., 2012).

However, as promising as this program seems, among these

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