

**Personal Statement by Sara Barrett (Trinity '21)
to Vanderbilt University Peabody College Graduate Program in Special Ed (Jan 2021)**

My desire to pursue a career in special education stems from an experience I had in high school observing the impact of physical and speech therapy on a family friend, Levi; his parents were told he would never walk or talk. Yet, by the age of four, he could solve math problems during our tutoring sessions and go on walks in the park. Levi is the reason I chose to major in Educational Studies with a focus on disability studies. I saw the positive outcome that a team of passionate and trained teachers can have on the life of someone with differing abilities. This field is consistently understaffed across the country, and I want to be one positive step towards improving that reality.

Throughout my education, I have seized on multiple opportunities to observe classrooms, to learn from professional educators in a range of settings, and to do first-hand educational work. In my first year of undergrad, I was placed in a public school second grade classroom with a partial inclusion framework. Here, the impact that routinely removing students and changing their classroom settings had on their social confidence and learning styles was striking. I discovered the strength it takes a special education teacher to stay calm and constantly rethink how to teach a topic when the students do not perceive it in the intended way—like when some students did not comprehend that one stick of ten blocks represented a ten value and not a one value. During my first and second year of undergrad, I taught art for grades K-5 in a Montessori school where students were able to express themselves and to show their depth of knowledge through art by drawing pictures of their families or creating clay animal figures and shoe box habitats. In my third year, I analyzed the benefits of arts education and non-profit work in K-8 schools which exposed me to a new approach to teaching standard subjects like math and science. Currently, in my senior year, I serve as a mentor for a first-year seminar where I assist the professor in conducting class discussions while also providing academic and emotional support for first-year students transitioning to college.

During my semester abroad, I interned at Sibongile: a day and night care center and school in Khayelitsha, South Africa. Most of the children at Sibongile live with cerebral palsy and other severe disabilities. This experience taught me that there are multiple ways to communicate when there is not a shared language: Yondela waved her hand when the food was too hot and Nizole did squats when he needed his diaper changed. I chose this internship to see if teaching special education was truly the right fit for me, and it affirmed my ability and passion for teaching students with differing abilities on a permanent basis. For five months, the children at Sibongile showed me the joys of a lively learning environment and challenged the ways I approach special education and disability rights activism.

That experience inspired my senior thesis which seeks to answer the question: how do various educational cultures view people with disabilities based on the education opportunities they receive? Specifically, I am doing a comparative study of special education policy in Hartford, Connecticut and Cape Town, South Africa to identify the differences and similarities among teacher training requirements, curriculum, and the treatment of students in the two places. This work may help policymakers understand what different cultures view as beneficial for children that need special education programs. Every person grasps and expresses knowledge in different ways, and I believe my past and current research aids in my goal for each student with a differing ability to have access to a fruitful education and dependable support network.

While pursuing my degree in Educational Studies, I have simultaneously been completing a B.A. in English with an emphasis in creative writing. This background will benefit me as a teacher because I am honing my communication and writing skills through my work in this major. Additionally, my creative writing background has already inspired me to write and illustrate a booklet - *The Clubhouse Quest* - to teach the students at Sibongile about friendship, compromise, and English. I plan to implement creative teaching techniques like this in my future work as an educator; for example, the students could write/illustrate their own booklets to learn the elements of a story—plot, characters, setting, etcetera—in a self-expressive and art-based approach. Also, I have spent a significant amount of time working as a Writing Associate in the Trinity College Writing Center where I have recently advanced to the position of head tutor. This experience has taught me how to explain concepts in various ways based on each student's learning style and how to ask open-ended questions that promote discussion. Both of these majors and my tutoring experience enhance my education background and provide unique skill sets that influence my approach to teaching.

I am applying to Vanderbilt University's Peabody College to obtain a Masters of Education in Special Education: High Incidence. I appreciate the way this program highlights advocacy, impacting social barriers, and field experience as part of a teacher's work. This builds upon my interest in dismantling stereotypes by demonstrating the many complexities and categories that surround disabilities. Dr. Alexandra Da Fonte's work on argumentative and alternative communication sounds fascinating and appears to improve special education programming. I am also interested in the Applied Behavior Analysis Specialization Program add-on as it combines training for my long-time career goal of being a diagnostician and love for psychology. My expectation is that the masters program will expand both my view of special education and of an educator's role in activism. I will be an asset to the cohort by offering my diverse experience in various classroom settings, a curiosity that pushes me to find multiple solutions for one issue, and a passion to make wherever I am a more welcome, inclusive, and equitable environment.

After obtaining my degree, I plan to teach special education in a public school with the intention

of becoming a diagnostician. I truly believe that the M.Ed. in Special Education at Vanderbilt's Peabody College can help me achieve these goals, so thank you for your consideration.