USING PORTRAITURE TO UNDERSTAND GOING INTO TEACHING IN K-8 AFTER ANOTHER CAREER

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine what motivated nontraditional students to go into teaching and reveal why they were sure, by their second year of experience, that they would stay in teaching. This study used the “participant as ally-essentialist approach” (Witz, 2007) to understand the participants’ stories. The primary data source was focus groups and one to three 1-on-1 in-depth follow-up interviews (90 minutes for each interview) with 9 participants who were second-year nontraditional elementary or middle schoolteachers. Each participant entered the profession by the same program designed for nontraditional students who may have had previous work experience, possibly even another degree or college credits; all of the participants came from the same site. Their ages ranged between 22 and 45 years when they started in the teacher education program.

The researchers developed eight portraits of participants who talked about their career progression. These portraits yielded three major findings of this study. First, the participants revealed their commitment to teaching, generally planning to stay in the career until they retired. Their commitment was further demonstrated in that all but 2 wanted to get their master’s degrees. In fact, one has already completed hers, and two others had begun their degree programs. Another major aspect in the portraits was that many of the participants used their earlier life experience and maturity in their classrooms. Many also had content-related skills that they used to manage their classrooms and deliver their subject areas to their students. Six of the participants had children. They were familiar with children and the school setting. The last major finding revealed that a significant proportion of teachers found the profession by accident. They were happy where they were and were not seeking other careers.

The results of this study suggest that, with increasing numbers of nontraditional students, teacher education programs need to take into account the assignments, delivery methods, and
class content. When it is time to place teachers in schools for internships and student teaching, the placement coordinator should be aware of their status. In addition, school districts should be aware that this population is committed to adding value to the school as soon as they arrive.
To my parents, my husband, my children, and Dr. Witz
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the chair of my committee, Dr. Klaus Witz, whose steady guidance has made this process the most meaningful of my educational experiences. Thank you for challenging me and introducing me to this methodology. You taught me so much about using my inner intelligence to keep the inspiration and momentum.

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This dissertation would not have been completed without my nine participants. I am ever so grateful to them for allowing me into their lives.

In addition to my committee and participants, I would like to thank my husband, Mike Brown, for the endless love, support, and guidance as I brought this dissertation to its completion.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ...................................................................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE .......................................................................................................................... 10

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY ......................................................................................................................................... 37

CHAPTER 4: PORTRAITS .................................................................................................................................................. 53

CHAPTER 5: CROSS-CASE DISCUSSION ....................................................................................................................... 126

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS .......................................................................................................................................... 147

REFERENCES ................................................................................................................................................................. 153
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Percentage of Public and Private School Teacher .................................................. 13
Table 2: Percentage of Public and Private School Leavers ..................................................... 14
Table 3: Participants of the Study ......................................................................................... 42
Table 4: Basic Demographics of the Participants ................................................................. 127
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

I was motivated to do this research because, having been an instructor in the School of Education at a Midwestern university for the last 13 years, teaching both traditional and nontraditional students, the issue of teacher retention has always been an interest of mine. I have mainly taught the method courses: reading, language arts, and social studies, along with supervising student teachers during their student teaching experience. The participants in this study have been in one to three of my method courses, so I had already established a good rapport with them and have known them for about four years. Nonetheless, I did not supervise any of them during their student teaching experience.

The overall issue I was thinking about is why teachers leave the profession early in their teaching career. Research shows that between 40% and 50% of beginning teachers leave after the first five years (American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU], 2005; College Board, 2006; Foster, 2010; Hernandez, 2007; Ingersoll, 2003, 2004, 2007; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Some research reports that about 30% of new public school teachers leave the profession over their first five years of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2010; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future [NCTAF], 2010). Because I instruct prospective teachers, this is a personal concern of mine. In this context, my initial idea was that one reason teachers might stay in education is that they were somehow influenced by their cooperating teacher during their student teaching experience. This experience is typically the culminating experience of a teacher education program that lasts about the length of a semester in most teacher education programs, long enough to perform all duties of the regular classroom teacher. The students in this study completed it in a 16-week format, but there are some programs at other colleges and
universities where the experience lasts for one academic school year. The student teacher is monitored by the certified classroom teacher, referred to as the cooperating teacher, along with a university supervisor. Therefore, initially I wanted to explore beginning teachers’ experience with their cooperating teacher to see if the cooperating teacher played a role with them staying in teaching. Education students typically spend more time with their cooperating teacher than any other person. Research repeatedly states that the cooperating teacher is the most influential figure in the teacher preparation program (Booth, 1993; DelGesso & Smith, 1993; Karmos & Jacko, 1977; Manning, 1977; McNally, Cope, Inglis, & Stonach, 1994; Pitton, 1994). Because the cooperating teacher has been identified as a key role model in the student teaching experience, one would assume that they might affect a prospective teacher’s decision to stay in education.

I conducted focus groups, using nontraditional students, on the issue of the cooperating teacher’s influence. The resulting outcome was that, while the participants believed that the cooperating teachers were helpful, they were not a major influence. Nonetheless, the participants in this study were convinced that they were going to stay in teaching. Therefore, I wanted to explore other possible reasons of why they were certain they were going to stay.

The definition of nontraditional students varies because educational institutions are allowed to create their own definition. Any student who does not begin college directly from high school is considered nontraditional. The traditional student is typically described as a young adult ranging in age from 21 to 23, while the nontraditional student typically comes from other careers, having more life experiences, and may be in their 40s and 50s (Podsen, 2002). Other researchers find that the typical age range describing traditional students is 18 to 24 years and nontraditional students are usually 25 or older (Hoyt, Howell, Touchet, Young, & Wygant,
The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), a national nonprofit organization, defines the nontraditional student as someone who has delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, works full time while enrolled, or has dependents other than a spouse (2008).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) uses the following characteristics to identify nontraditional students: (a) delays enrollment, (b) attends part time, (c) is employed full-time, (d) is financially independent, (e) has dependents, (f) is a single parent, or (g) does not have a high school diploma (Choy, 2002). Nontraditional students could have one or more of these traits. Horn and Carroll (1996) classifies students as “minimally nontraditional” if they have only one of these traits, “moderately nontraditional” if they have two or three, and “highly nontraditional” if they have four or more.

I used focus groups of second-year teachers who were nontraditional students, along with one to three one-on-one follow up interviews, to get the teachers personal stories. I wanted to hear when these teachers first thought about becoming a teacher and why they are sure that teaching is right for them.

**Statement of the Problem**

To ensure excellence in every classroom, excellent teachers have to be recruited and retained. However, nearly half of the new teachers who enter elementary and secondary classrooms will leave the profession within five years (AASCU, 2005; College Board, 2006; Foster, 2010; Hernandez, 2007; Ingersoll, 2003, 2004, 2007; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Teaching is increasingly “a revolving door occupation with relatively high flows in, through, and out of schools” (Ingersoll, 2003, 2007). Because of this “revolving door” dilemma, school districts are constantly interviewing for new teachers (AASCU, 2005). Every profession expects some
turnover as employees leave to retire, pursue other careers, or for other various reasons. According to Ingersoll (2007), “teaching has higher turnover rates than a number of higher-status professions (such as professors and scientific professionals), about the same as other traditionally female occupations (such as nurses) and less than some lower-status, lower-skill occupations (such as clerical workers).” Additionally, he stated that the teaching population represents 4% of the civilian workforce (p. 5).

The near 50% problem has exacerbated the supply of teachers, and now there is a demand for quality teachers. Three days after taking office, President George W. Bush introduced the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which was a continuation of education initiatives of the prior administrations. It was passed in the winter of 2002. Producing and retaining qualified teachers is a goal of NCLB. The NCLB Act is the reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), established in 1965, and redefines the federal role in K-12 education and plans to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. In this legislation, America’s schools must report their success in terms of what each student accomplishes. Putting qualified teachers in American classrooms is a top priority. The challenge is that nothing is more important to a child’s success in school than finding and employing well-prepared teachers. Many children, especially in urban and rural schools, do not have the benefit of well-prepared teachers in their classrooms. The Act’s solution is that every state should have a well-prepared teacher in every classroom who knows what to teach, how to teach, and has command of the subject matter being taught (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

In the past, the majority of teachers have prepared for their career by completing an undergraduate college program, usually lasting four years, referred to as “traditional route
Programs include courses on how to teach (pedagogy), as well as academic content, and may include courses working with special populations such as special education. Field experience, often called “student teaching,” is a part of the program that helps students gain experience in a classroom by working with an experienced teacher. Programs require candidates to complete tests throughout the program to teach (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

In recent years, states have focused on developing ways to bring individuals who already have a bachelor’s degree and expertise in a subject area into the field of teaching. Programs have been implemented to attract high-quality individuals, especially minority and males (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). This alternative path is known as “alternative route.” For example, by 2006, all 50 states and the District of Columbia provided alternative routes to teacher certification through approximately 485 program sites (Feistritzer & Haar, 2008).

Organizations and programs such as Troops-to-Teachers, Teach for America (TFA), and The New Teacher Project (TNTP) were launched in the 1990s to encourage professionals to consider a career in teaching (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Troops-to-Teachers, for example, is a U.S. Department of Education and Department of Defense program that helps military personnel begin a new career as teachers in low-income public schools where their skills, knowledge, and experience are most needed, especially in math, science, and special education (Bank, 2007). The U.S. Department of Education is now responsible for program oversight and funding, but the Department of Defense continues to operate it. The NCLB Act of 2001 provides for the continuation of the program (Troops-to-Teachers, 2008). Any troop desiring certification must check with the teacher certification agency in the state they want to teach to get their requirements for certification. A development of this program is TNTP, founded by a TFA graduate.
Walsh and Jacobs (2007) believed that many programs referred to as “alternative route” are not alternative. Many of these teachers have had to go through the same academic requirements and training as teachers who went through the traditional route program. Walsh and Jacobs define a true alternative certification program using four criteria, (1) academic selectivity (stronger than 2.5 grade point average, but still placing more weight on work experience and job performance); (2) strong subject-matter knowledge (a test demonstrating subject mastery); (3) streamlined and practical sequence (focus only on courses where a teacher must be competent); and (4) intensive new teacher support (assigned a full time mentor).

Some programs come with much criticism. TFA is a program that recruits, trains, and places teachers in troubled urban schools after a summer of training. Darling-Hammond (1994), an opponent of the program states, “…TFA’s shortcoming are serious, and they ultimately hurt many schools and the children in them (p. 22).” Comparing the quality of the traditional and nontraditional routes to teacher certification is beyond the scope of this paper.

Little qualitative research addresses why nontraditional teachers go into the teaching profession and why they are sure that teaching is for them. However, two dissertations were most relevant and were qualitative, personal, and involved case studies. Lee (2010) conducted interviews, classroom observations, and examined reflective journals of 12 participants, elementary to college experience, to examine the motivation factors, common experiences, and reflections of their decision to leave already established careers to pursue a career in teaching. Erlandson (2009) used personal interviews, fieldwork, and field notes of five participants who had been teaching middle school or high school for at least three years to determine success factors necessary for those who make a career switch to teaching. These two studies, along with other dissertations and published papers will be addressed in the next chapter.
There is a great need for detailed case studies of how it is that nontraditional second year teachers know that they will stay in teaching. Such portraits would focus on (a) seeing when their vision of teaching began, (b) what experiences influenced them, (c) what motivated them to take the step into teaching, and (d) how is it that they know they will stay.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to find out what motivated nontraditional teachers to go into teaching and why they were sure, in their second year of experience, they would stay in teaching. To do this, I conducted four focus groups. Three of the focus groups had two participants and one focus group had three participants. All of the conversations were recorded. After transcribing the tapes and developing a timeline on each participant, I conducted one to three one-on-one follow-up interviews with each of the participants as I developed their portraits. A cross case discussion is included. The target population of the study was second year teachers who graduated with their bachelor’s degree in elementary education or had a previous bachelor’s degree and had taken the necessary courses and exams to be certified to teach through an adult comprehensive education program held in a Midwestern, private university.

In my pilot work, participants freely shared their feelings of their career paths. With committee approval, I used these participants for my dissertation study. First, I explored the teachers’ journeys into the education profession to determine whether their interest developed many years earlier, such as when they were in high school. Second, I looked at their internships, student teaching experiences, and first two years of teaching. Last, I looked into how they knew that they would stay in teaching. Accordingly, these portraits paint a holistic picture of each participant’s larger internal workings.

The guiding research questions were as follows:
1. What were nontraditional second year teacher beliefs, and to what extent does it seem likely, that one will stay in teaching?

2. What were the nontraditional teachers’ personal paths to deciding on education as their career?

3. Did life experiences play a role in leading them to education?

**Significance of the Study**

This study looked at second-year teachers who were nontraditional students while working towards teacher certification. I expect the results of this study to be helpful primarily in two ways. First, education departments need to understand the needs, motivations, values, and experiences of nontraditional students and recognize how their programs might better serve this group. Nontraditional students bring not only a wealth of personal and work related experiences, but they also possibly bring circumstances such as, current employment and raising a family that may play a role in their success. Many nontraditional students are seeking programs in an accelerated, flexible format that allow them to balance it all. Noel-Levitz (2009) found that issues such as faculty interaction, resources provided to students, policies that are in place, and the students’ overall feelings about the value of the experience are relevant to nontraditional students and can lead to greater satisfaction for this growing population. Programs that better understand this population should have higher graduation rates and more satisfied students.

Second, I expect this study to aid administrators who work with teachers who were nontraditional students. School districts struggle with the issue of teacher retention. Nontraditional students have different backgrounds and life experiences when compared to traditional students. Administrators who can effectively utilize these differences can increase their teacher retention by knowing about this population.
Limitation of the Study

One limitation to this study is that all of the participants attended the same accelerated teacher education program at a single site. The site had a more specialized clientele than I originally thought.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

In this qualitative study, I investigated why nontraditional teachers enter the teaching profession and why they are so sure that teaching is for them. I purposely explored their stories and worked with a time line. A careful understanding of each participant’s narrative of his or her life journey, which ranged from work experiences before they went into education to interests in education from childhood on, to any personal experiences, helped explain why they changed careers, and why they were sure they would stay in education. All of these events played a part in where they are today.

This literature review consists of three sections. The first section reviews the literature on teacher retention (staying in teaching) and teacher attrition (leaving teaching). The second section discusses the definition of this population and its role in the larger picture of teachers. The last section addresses the existing significant qualitative studies of this population.

Teacher Retention and Teacher Attrition

Almost 50% of new teachers leave within the first five years.

Every September, parents ask the same important questions. Who is teaching my child? Will my child’s teacher inspire her? Will he look after her individual needs? Will the teacher help my child learn all the necessary basic skills, as well as how to think and solve problems in the years ahead? Will my child’s teacher be deeply knowledgeable about the subjects she teaches and about the children she teaches as well? (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 1)

School districts have tried to answer these questions by hiring qualified teachers. However, they also face another significant issue, how to retain qualified teachers. Schools, districts, and states have tried to increase the number of potential teachers by providing alternative pathways to teaching, paying signing bonuses, and increasing salaries. They also
have tried to retain teachers by offering student loan forgiveness, housing assistance, and scholarships and tuition reimbursement for graduate courses (Hirsch, Koppich, & Knapp, 2001).

Despite these many efforts, many teachers leave the teaching profession early in their careers. Ingersoll (2007) stated that as many as 50% of those trained to be teachers chose not to enter the teaching profession. Research shows that between 40% and 50% of beginning teachers leave after the first five years (AASCU, 2005; College Board, 2006; Foster, 2010; Hernandez, 2007; Ingersoll, 2003, 2004, 2007; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Some research reported that approximately 30% of new public school teachers leave the profession over their first five years of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2010; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2010). Ingersoll (2001) found that urban turnover rates were significantly higher than rural turnover rates, but that urban and suburban turnover rates did not differ by a significant margin.

With a career of this size, one would expect a number of teachers in transition every year. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2008), 16% of teachers who leave the teaching profession leave for retirement purposes. The remaining 84% of teacher attrition is attributed to teachers moving to another school or leaving the profession entirely. The teachers who leave pre-retirement often do so because of job dissatisfaction or because they are in search of better jobs or other careers. Of the teachers who reported job dissatisfaction, most connected it to low salaries, lack of support from the school administration, student discipline problems, and lack of influence over school decision-making (Ingersoll, 2007).

According to some researchers, it is normal for all organizations, including teaching, to experience some degree of turnover, and it can be beneficial. Eliminating low-performing workers and bringing in new employees with passion and enthusiasm could be favorable (Ingersoll, 2007; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), but turnover carries a significant cost. According to
Alliance for Excellent Education (2005), a conservative national estimate of the cost of replacing teachers who left the profession was $2.2 billion per year. The costs could reach $4.9 billion per year if the cost of replacing teachers who transfer schools is included. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2008) stated that the cost of teacher attrition could vary widely by district. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (2007) found the cost to be even higher than what the Alliance for Excellent Education reported. The NCTAF estimates the cost could be as high as $7.3 billion per year.

When viewed geographically or by subject matter, some areas and subject matters experience surpluses while others experience shortages. Areas such as the Northeast and the Middle Atlantic regions have an overall surplus of teachers, while the West coast, Alaska, and Hawaii have an overall shortage of teachers. Overall, subject areas such as math, science, special education, and bilingual education have shortages, while subject areas such as art, music, and health and physical education have surpluses (American Association for Employment in Education [AAEE], 2008).

Loeb, Darling-Hammond, and Luczak (2005) used California data to examine the impact school conditions and demographic factors have on predicting teacher turnover. The results showed that, although schools’ racial compositions and proportions of low-income students predict teacher turnover, both salaries and working conditions – including large class sizes, facilities problems, multi-track schools, and lack of textbooks – are strong and significant factors in predicting high rates of turnover. After accounting for these conditions, the influence of student characteristics on turnover is noticeably reduced.
Reasons for Attrition

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) published the Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS) in 2007 (as cited in Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, & Morton, 2007), which included a sample of elementary and secondary teachers who participated in the previous year’s Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). The TFS included teachers who continued to teach, but moved from their base school (movers), and those who left teaching in the following year (leavers). Each group was asked to rate the factors they considered very important or extremely important when making their decision to continue to teach or leave. Tables 1 and 2 present Teacher Follow-up Survey rankings of these factors (Marvel et al., 2007):

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Moving</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New school is closer to home</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better salary or benefits</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher job security</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for a better teaching assignment (subject area or grade level)</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with workplace conditions at previous school</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with support from administrators at previous school</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with changes in job description or responsibilities</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laid off or involuntarily transferred</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not have enough autonomy over classroom at previous school</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with opportunities for professional development at previous school</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with base year school for other reasons</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Movers were teachers who were still teaching in the current school year but had moved to a different school after the base year (2003-2004). Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each reason individually in their decision to move from the base year school, although some reasons may have been involuntary. Response choices were based on a 5-point scale: 1 = not at all important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = somewhat important, 4 = very important, and 5 = extremely important. This table includes the percentage of movers who responded very important or extremely important.
Table 2

Percentage of Public and Private School Leavers who Rated Various Reasons as Very Important or Extremely Important in their Decisions to Leave the Position of a K-12 Teacher: 2004-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for leaving</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changed residence</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy or child rearing</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School staffing action (e.g., reduction-in-force, lay-off, school closing, school reorganization, reassignment)</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better salary or benefits</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To pursue a position other than that of a K-12 teacher</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To take courses to improve career opportunities within the field of education</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To take courses to improve career opportunities outside the field of education</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied with teaching as a career</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied with previous school or teaching assignment</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family or personal reasons</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leavers were teachers who left the teaching profession after the base year (2003-04). Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various reasons in their decision to leave the teaching profession, although some reasons may have been involuntary. Response choices were based on a 5-point scale: 1 = not at all important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = somewhat important, 4 = very important, and 5 = extremely important. This table includes the percentage of movers who responded very important or extremely important.

Public school teachers who transferred schools (movers) listed “opportunity for better teaching assignments” (38.1%), “dissatisfaction with support for administrators” (37.2%), and “dissatisfaction with workplace conditions” (32.7%) as their main reasons for moving. In contrast, private school teachers who transferred schools list “better pay” (46.4%), “higher job security” (33.4%), and “opportunity for better teaching assignments” (33.1%).

Findings revealed more consistency between public school teachers and private school teachers who left the teaching profession (leavers). Public school teachers listed “retirement” (31.4%), “pursue a position other than teaching” (25.3%), and “other family and personal reasons” (20.4%), while private school teachers listed “other family and personal reasons” (30.6%), “pursue a position other than teaching” (29.5%), and “pregnancy” (24.6%) as the main reasons for leaving.
Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2008) researched the connection between teacher attrition and student test scores. Using New York City (NYC) student math scores on standardized achievement tests as a measure of teacher effectiveness, they created a database that matched each student with their school and teacher. Teachers were placed in cohorts based on their starting dates of 2000-2004. Teachers were further classified as “remaining at their original NYC school,” “transferring to another NYC school,” “transferring to different New York State (NYS) system,” or “leaving NYS public schools.” They found that, on average, by the end of the third year of teaching, 17% of teachers in each cohort had transferred to another NYC school, 6% of teachers had transferred to different NYS system, and 28% of teachers had left NYS public schools. They further found an inverse correlation between teacher attrition and student test scores, an inverse correlation between teacher attrition and improvement in student test scores, and that teachers in grades 6-8 had higher attrition rates than did teachers in grades 4 and 5.

Allensworth, Ponisciak, and Mazzeo (2009) surveyed teacher retention in the Chicago Public School (CPS) System for the years 2002-2003 through 2006-2007. This data included 24,848 teachers in 538 elementary schools and 9,882 teachers in 118 high schools. Defining teacher retention as “teachers who remained at their initial school,” they classified schools based upon their attrition percentage as follows: less than 10% with “high stability,” between 10 and 20% with “medium stability,” between 20 and 30% with “low stability,” and greater than 30% with “chronic instability.”

Allensworth et al. (2009) analyzed the data from four viewpoints: teacher variables, school enrollment, student characteristics, and geographical area characteristics. They found that the retention rate for CPS teachers was about 60% for third-year teachers and about 50% for
fourth-year teachers, rates that are similar to national rates. Their analysis showed that when looking at the teacher characteristics of experience, age, sex, race, and colleges or universities, only experience and age were significant indicators of stability. They found that teachers who were new to the profession were more likely to leave. They also found that teachers under the age of 30 or 50+ were more likely to leave when compared to teachers between the ages of 31 and 49. They also found that schools with declining enrollments or schools that had smaller enrollments had lower stability rates and that schools with lower student test scores, measured by the ISAT exam, had a higher proportion of low-income or minority students or that were located in higher crime areas had lower stability rates.

Monk (2007) examined the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas. NCES 2003-2004 data showed that there were approximately 8.4 million students in rural public schools out of an approximate 47.3 million students nationwide. He found that rural schools have a higher percentage of teachers with 3 years or less of teaching and have a lower percentage of teachers with advanced degrees. He further found that rural schools have a lower percentage of teachers with full standard state certification, have higher vacancy rates, and have lower pay scales. Teacher recruitment and retention are major problems for many rural schools, because issues such as lower quality of community life, problematic working conditions, greater student needs, limited support services, and inadequate support services.

**Induction and Mentoring**

Well-designed induction and mentoring programs, which include planning and collaboration with other teachers, have been found to increase retention rates for new teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005; Portner, 2008; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). According to Fulton, Yoon, and Lee (2005), even though the terms, induction and mentoring, are
sometimes used interchangeably, they are not the same. They defined induction in a paper for the NCTAF (Fulton et al., 2005):

A system of induction should include a network of supports, people, and processes that are all focused on assuring that novices become effective in their work. An induction system is both a phase – a set period – and a network of relationships and supports with well-defined roles, activities, and outcomes (p. 4)

Their research shows that a comprehensive induction system significantly improves the likelihood of a teacher staying in the career and not leaving at the end of the school year. They suggest that an induction system must include key goals, so the focus is not only on survival support. Key goals should include building and deepening teacher knowledge; integrating new practitioners into a teaching community and school culture that support the continuous professional growth of all teachers; supporting the constant development of the teaching community in the school; and encouraging a professional dialogue that articulates the goals, values, and best practices of a community.

According to Wong (2002), a good comprehensive induction program begins four or five days before school begins and continues with two or three years of systematic training. Elements should include the following: administrative support; a mentoring component; visits to demonstration classrooms; help establishing effective classroom management procedures, routines and instructional practices; help developing teachers' sensitivity to and understanding of the community, as well as their passion for lifelong learning and professional growth; and should promote unity and teamwork among the entire learning community.

Wong (2002) also noted an exemplary induction program in Thibodaux, Louisiana that reduced the attrition rate from 51% to 15% without much delay after launching the new-teacher induction program in 1996. Another example, in Port Huron, Michigan, the superintendent, who
initiated the program, noted that, after only seven years, there were more induction-bred teachers than there were veteran teachers in their district.

Fulton et al. (2005) continued:

One of the most positive aspects of induction is the spotlight it puts on the school culture that a new teacher enters. In cultures where teachers are expected to work as solo practitioners, teaching with the door closed and with little opportunity for interaction among peers, a new teacher’s isolation is profound. In these school cultures, novices learn quickly that they are on their own. Even if the school provides a mentor and some form of orientation and professional development, these formal support systems are likely to reinforce the isolated teacher culture of that school. (p. 13)

Many states, districts, and schools view comprehensive induction in different ways. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) reported “what it is not” and “what it does.”

It is not:

- Induction is not a crash course in teaching. Teachers must enter the classroom with content knowledge and teaching skills.
- Induction is not an orientation session in which administrators tell teachers where the copy machine and refrigerator are located.
- Induction is not a stand-alone mentoring program. It does include time for new teachers to work with mentors to improve their instruction, but it also must effectively retain and develop teachers.
- Induction is not a string of disconnected one-day workshops.
- Induction is not a top-down, unidirectional approach to teacher learning where new teachers are expected to be only passive recipients. Beginners also have knowledge and skills to offer existing teachers, mentors, administrators, and principals.
- Induction is not just of benefit to beginning teachers. High-quality veteran teachers also can improve their skills by participating in induction through common planning time with inductees.
- Induction is not a way to help teachers cope with dysfunctional schools. It can facilitate positive, systemic change in the local school environment and, ultimately, in the teaching profession. (p. 3)

What it does:

- Induction keeps quality teachers in the profession.
- Induction weeds poor teachers out.
- Induction teaches beginning teachers clinical, practical skills.
- Induction builds a community of teachers who are learners.
• Induction orients teachers into their local school.
• Induction orients teachers into the efficacy and worth of their profession.

Furthermore, they found that less than 1% of teachers received a comprehensive induction program. They also found that teachers were more likely to remain at their schools if they received mentoring from teachers who were in their subject area and were more likely to remain in their school districts if they received mentoring.

An induction program usually will have a mentoring component to mentor incoming teachers. In this component, they train mentors, put in place a variety of support programs for new teachers, offer administrative support for the mentor program, and have a comprehensive plan that devises and measures the expectations for the induction program (Saphier, Freedman, & Aschheim, 2007).

Mentoring, the one-on-one relationship with numerous interactions between a beginning teacher and a veteran is part of a larger system known as induction, is the most complex and intricate role in the induction process (Portner, 2008). It is a component of induction and many of the mentoring programs vary widely. Some mentoring programs only have the mentors occasionally check in on mentees, which is not enough (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). Mentors must support beginning teachers by acting as safety nets, answering questions, and providing guidance when needed. Therefore, mentors must be selected carefully (Starkey, 2007). Fulton et al. (2005) explained mentoring:

Mentoring describes a process by which a more experienced or knowledgeable individual offers assistance to a less expert individual. The support may or may not be structured in a full- or (as is most often the case) part-time capacity. A good mentor can be of real help to a new teacher as a “safety net” and source of emotional support at times of great stress and many challenges. But a poorly prepared or over-extended mentor can be of little assistance, and, in some situations where mentor selection is haphazard, mentors may even reinforce bad practice. In short, mentoring alone is not enough. Mentoring, when done well,
can provide an important component of induction, but it is only one piece of what should be a system of induction. (p. 4)

Both the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the nation’s largest teacher unions, support the plan of all beginning teachers being assigned to a mentor (Portner, 2008). The role of the mentor is that of guide, supporter, friend, advocate, and role model. As a guide, the mentor helps the mentee effectively get through the first year in the classroom. In the role of supporter, the mentor values differences within the mentee and aids them in developing their individual talents. A mentor does not evaluate, as a friend, but instead helps the mentee view things from different angles. A mentor and mentee accept each other the way they are, working through complex times, with the mentor offering thoughts and being a concerned listener when needed. Finally, a mentor must be a role model by showing evidence of the qualities that they converse to the mentee (Pitton, 2006). For those reasons, a mentor is invaluable to the successful training of a new professional.

Ingersoll and Kralik (2004) believed that policymakers and education leaders should consider investing more time and resources into studying the connection between mentoring and teacher retention. If the success of new teachers was critically linked to their first teaching experiences and the opportunities they are given to talk through issues they faced in the classroom (Pitton, 2006), then continued energy should be directed toward the study of induction and mentoring.

Idea and Growth of Nontraditional Students

Many teachers entering the profession today are not the traditional teacher in their early 20s. Stokes (2005) reported that the traditional 18- to 22-year-old full-time undergraduate student residing on campus represented little more than 16% of the higher education population
in the United States, fewer than 3 million of the more than 17 million students enrolled today.

He continued that 40% of students are aged 25 or older.

Other researchers have identified this population of students entering the profession. The 18- to 24-year-old, financially dependent student enrolled at a 4-year university now comprises only 60% of all students enrolled in higher education in the United States. The other 40% were nontraditional students who were 25+ years, and possibly worked full-time, enrolled part-time, were financially independent, had dependents other than a spouse, were single parents, or did not have high school diplomas. Most enrolled in community colleges and for-profit institutions.

Most were women (60%) and increasing percentages (more than 10%) were African American or Hispanic (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). Therefore, the nontraditional teacher would be someone who brings wide-ranging experiences to the classroom.

**Alternative Certification**

Alternative routes to teaching targeted meeting the needs of many individuals wanting to teach (Feistritzer, 2005). To meet these needs, alternative certification became known in the early 1980s as a more manageable way for talented individuals to enter the classrooms (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007). One in 5 new teachers entered schools through alternative programs (Feistritzer, 2005; Peterson & Nadler, 2009; Walsh & Jacobs, 2007). In 1983, New Jersey created the first alternate route, placing well-educated individuals in the public schools by hiring them as teachers, reducing or eliminating “theory” courses from their training, and using experienced teachers to mentor them during their first year or two (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007). The New Jersey Provisional Teacher Program allowed career switchers and other talented individuals to enter the teaching profession. Individuals had to obtain a certificate of eligibility that gave them permission to seek a teaching position to enroll. Requirements for the certificate included a
bachelor’s degree with a minimum grade point average of 2.75; a major in the discipline which the secondary school candidates teach; and a passing score on the Praxis II subject assessment test or National Teacher Examination (NTE) programs specialty area test. Once they had these and accepted a position, the district registered the employment with the state’s Office of Professional Development, the New Jersey Department of Education issued a short-term license, and the individual was recognized as an alternative route teacher (Humphrey, Wechsler, & Hough, 2005).

The program proved successful, leading the way for more states to put into practice similar programs (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007). However, each state establishes its own definition of alternative certification, so programs vary from state to state. For example, some states include the Troops-to-Teachers (TTT) program. Depending upon the state, some applicants can begin teaching without a teaching certificate, based upon their academic background and skills and the school’s need (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support [DANTES], 2012). Because of the NCLB, most states want teachers who are fully certified. The TTT was established by the Department of Defense in 1994 to help improve public school education by providing funds to recruit, prepare, and support former members of the military services as teacher in high-poverty schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The TTT helps relieve teacher shortages, especially in math, science, special education and other critical subject areas, and assists military personnel in making successful transitions to second careers in teaching (DANTES, 2012). Former members of the U.S. Armed Forces and Reserves desiring to be an elementary or secondary teacher may apply for acceptance into the program if they have a baccalaureate or advanced degree and have left or will leave active duty on honorable terms after serving for several years. In most states, TTT does not train or certify teachers, but rather helps
members find and enter a program. Eligible members can receive financial assistance in the form of stipends or bonuses (DANTES, 2012). According to Gantt (2009), the retention rate of those who were in the TTT program and began teaching five years ago was 75%.

A volunteer program that recruits new college graduates from competitive universities to become teachers in hard-to-staff urban and rural areas is Teach For America (TFA). Note that TFA is a continuation of the original concept of the National Teachers Corps, which began in 1965 and lasted until 1981 when it became part of the educational block grant program. TFA was revived as a program in 2006. In all TFA regions, corps members without undergraduate teaching degrees are eligible to obtain state-issued teaching certificates, licenses, or permits through alternative teacher certification routes, which enable school districts to hire them. Although requirements for teaching vary significantly by state and are typically different for early childhood and K-12 teachers even within the same state, in the vast majority of cases, corps members must possess a bachelor's degree and demonstrate subject area mastery by completing undergraduate coursework and/or passing certain tests prior to being hired for a full-time teaching position. In addition, most states require individuals who come in through nontraditional teacher education backgrounds to enroll in state-approved coursework or certification programs (www.teachforamerica.org).

Teach for America accepts corps members who have records of achievement, are committed to the TFA mission, accept responsibility for outcomes, demonstrate organization ability, show respect for others, and possess critical thinking skills. Following a 5-week summer training session and a 1- to 2-week orientation in their placement region, corps members have numerous readings, observations, and follow-up conversations with the teachers they observe. They are then placed in a classroom where they receive ongoing support from the TFA regional
office during the school year; this is a two-year commitment (Humphrey et al., 2005). More than 50% of TFA teachers leave after two years, and more than 80% leave after three years, according to Heilig and Jez (2010).

Typically, alternative certification programs offer qualified teacher candidates a program that places them in a classroom sooner than traditional programs. The program will treat nontraditional students as transfer students, similar to traditional students, and will give academic credit for previous college or university work. Therefore, the two routes seem likely to increase in similarity (Humphrey et al., 2005). Nonetheless, without the alternative program many would not have become teachers (Feistritzer, 2005).

The participants in my study graduated from an accelerated traditional program, as opposed to an alternative program. As described in Chapter 3, students in both the traditional and the accelerated programs were required to meet the same educational requirements.

Qualitative Studies of Nontraditional Students

Because the occurrence of second career teachers is relatively new, there is little qualitative research on why nontraditional teachers enter the teaching profession and whether or not they will remain in the profession. Lee (2010), Erlandson (2009), Brown-Spellman (2009), Braungard-Galayda (2007), Anthony and Ord (2008), Castro and Bauml (2009), Lerner and Zittleman (2002), and Chong and Goh (2007), have addressed nontraditional career switchers entering into teaching.

Two studies, Erlandson (2009) and Lee (2010), are the most relevant to my research. Both are qualitative, personal, and involve case studies. Lee conducted interviews, classroom observations, and examined reflective journals of 12 participants, elementary to college experience, to examine the motivation factors, common experiences, and reflections of their decision to leave already established careers to pursue a career in teaching. Erlandson (2009)
used personal interviews, fieldwork, and field notes of five participants who had been teaching middle school or high school for at least three years to determine success factors necessary for those who make a career switch to teaching. While Spellman (2009) may be somewhat relevant, she had a different population. She conducted interviews, document analysis, and home visits of five participants enrolled in a teacher education program and who had not yet begun teaching. In her study, she described how and why they persisted in spite of risk factors commonly associated with nontraditional students. I should also note that all three of these studies are dissertations.

Nontraditional Teachers

Lee (2010) interviewed 12 second-career teachers, one elementary, two middle school, eight high school, and one college, to examine the motivation factors, common experiences, and reflections of the participants concerning their decision to leave already established professions to pursue a career in teaching. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, data was gathered utilizing classroom observations and subject-kept journals. The author himself is a second career teacher, having spent three years in the U.S. Army, along with two years as a civilian employee while attending graduate school. His intent for the study was to find a sample of participants who were teaching in different grade levels from kindergarten to college and in diverse subject matter, in different schools and districts, with an experience range from pre-service to 20-plus years of service. Participants came from a variety of professional backgrounds, including business, industry, and government, and had from three to 30-plus years in their previous careers.

The participants mentioned numerous reasons about what motivated them to leave their previous profession for teaching. Among these were the desire to make a difference in the lives of other people, the need to do more meaningful and fulfilling work, the need to leave a legacy
for future generations, the desire to have a more flexible schedule, love of subject matter, and the
desire to share life experiences with younger people. Many of the participants were encouraged
to change careers by family, friends, former teachers, and coaches.

Participants shared some common experiences in the decision to become teachers. Many
of the participants had at one time considered and then rejected teaching as a college major as an
undergraduate. Others had no initial interest in teaching. Almost all had reached a point of
dissatisfaction with the previous career. Some thought they had reached a plateau with no hope
of advancement. Others realized that they had chosen the wrong career upon graduating from
college. Most of the participants struggled with leaving an already established career, especially
when they had family responsibilities. Some were frustrated with the teacher training process,
including what they considered excessive requirements by the state for those seeking alternative
certification.

Finally, all participants believed that student teaching was the most valuable preparation
experience of their programs. Most spoke of the need for more field experiences in the
programs, especially for second career participants. All of the participants valued having prior
experiences before becoming teachers. About half of the participants mentioned specific skills,
such as computer applications or management strategies that have benefited them now as
teachers. Many participants commented that they enjoy teaching and intend to continue until
retirement. Having more time to spend with family and friends and being able to pursue other
interests outside of work made them satisfied with their new career. On the other hand, there
were areas of dissatisfaction. The bureaucratic nature of schools, the overwhelming demands
placed on teachers, and the apathy of many students and parents were concerns that a few
participants indicated might eventually lead them to another career in the near future.
Success in Teaching

Erlandson (2009) interviewed five middle and high school teachers who were at least 30 years old and had been teaching at least three years to determine success factors necessary for those who make a career switch to teaching. Factors included a sense of calling, financial motivation, barriers to overcome, administrative support, retention, and definition of success. In addition to personal interviews, the researcher collected data from fieldwork, such as information about physical setting of school, classroom, department, current teaching assignment, past teaching assignment, size of school, demographics of school and other pertinent descriptive information, along with data from field notes about the participants’ body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions during the interview.

Five themes related to the central research question, ‘What are the success factors necessary for individuals who make a career switch to teaching?’ emerged. The themes included the following: (a) motivating reasons to be a teacher, (b) financial implications of career-switching to become a teacher, (c) value of coursework in preparing to become a teacher, (d) internal and external supports necessary as a career-switching teacher, and (e) the impact of a previous career on success as a career-switching teacher.

Motivating reasons consisted of personal fulfillment and the chance to make a difference in students’ lives, something lacking in their previous careers. Consistency, dependability, and daily routine were all practical reasons that also emerged as motivating factors to become a teacher. Another theme, financial issues, was a concern by all but one of the participants. With the next theme, pedagogical training, most participants responded that much of the coursework was not challenging, had little value in the classroom, and was impractical.
Having internal and external supports was another theme that emerged in relation to a career-switching teacher. Participants wanted a supportive, flexible principal who provided leadership and ensured that the curriculum was in place and materials were accessible. Family, having an effective mentor, and the needs for positive, healthy relationships with staff members, students, and parents were also key factors of support. Finally, the importance of bringing real world experiences and direct transferable skills such as relationship building, leadership, and time management was a further theme that emerged.

**Nontraditional Females in Teacher Education Programs**

Brown-Spellman (2009) researched the behaviors, beliefs, and support systems that facilitated the persistence of nontraditional female students in a teacher education program. Five participants, age 30 and older, were studied to determine how and why they persisted in spite of risk factors commonly associated with nontraditional students. Data was collected through interviews, home visits, and document analysis, which included a review of academic transcripts, personal reflections documented in professional portfolios, and evaluations of field studies and clinical practice while enrolled in the teacher education program.

All of the participants enrolled in the program for both personal and family reasons. Self-fulfillment, the desire to return to college to complete a degree, and the ability to be self-sufficient were all reasons. Another purpose for enrolling was the additional income. At some point, each participant was anxious and struggled to balance home and school responsibilities. With the support of others, all five of the participants completed the program.

Internal sources were risk factors for each of the participants. The ability to balance home, work, and school were a concern. Four of the five women had school-aged children at home. All of the participants had a high level of self-awareness, were in touch with their
thoughts and feelings, and possessed the qualities and characteristics to persist in the program. Even though all of the participants had attended college at some point in their lives before enrolling in the teacher education program, they had a high level of determination to complete the requirements.

Financial issues were an external source that threatened some of the participants. Three of the women who were working when they started the program had to stop prior to student teaching. One participant battled serious health issues during her last year in the program, and two other participants had immediate family members who faced health crises. Other external sources that posed a threat were limited course availability and courses that posed time conflicts, and program requirements that decreased the amount of time spent with families.

Finally, all of the participants gave credit to their families for supporting them throughout their time in the program. The participant’s goal of program completion was also a source of support. Each participant had a reason for completing the program, such as wanting to be a teacher that children would remember the rest of their lives or wanting to be effective and make learning fun.

The next two studies, Braungard-Galayda (2007) and Anthony and Ord (2008), while not particularly relevant to my research, are qualitative and attempt to find out what motivated the participants to pursue a career in teaching. They are both studies of motivation, like mine. However, because they addressed a different population, they were not particularly relevant. These studies were not in the case study format, rather both were personal, but organized by themes. The output was a classification. Case studies are important to get a larger perspective of the participants. Braungard-Galayda conducted interviews with eight participants, ages 28-54, who are currently teaching high school. Anthony and Ord administered questionnaires to 100
participants, ages 21-51 and older, followed by interviews of 68 participants from the same group. All participants had recently graduated from a teacher education program. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at mid-year and end-year points during their first year of teaching and at mid-year point of their second year of teaching. I am not saying much about this study, even though it is interesting, because the study was from New Zealand, and I do not know much about the New Zealand system and how to evaluate it. I should also note that this was Braungard-Galayda’s dissertation. The other study, Anthony and Ord’s published paper was based on the dissertation of the second author.

Career Change to Teaching

Braungard-Galayda (2007) interviewed eight nontraditional teachers who left their previous careers and either entered into teaching through the traditional certification or alternative route certification. The participants were age 28 to 54. All of the participants received their certification through an alternative route. All participants teach at the high school level. However, one participant teaches between two schools, with one assignment at the high school and one assignment at a middle school. Results were organized around six main themes: (a) reasons why they changed careers, (b) experiences of beginning teachers, (c) adequacy of preparation to teach/job satisfaction, (d) adequate training for diverse populations, (e) what motivated them to stay, and (f) future career goals.

First, the participants gave many reasons for changing careers. For example, the previous job was demanding, long hours were required; they wanted to start a family, wanted financial stability, wanted to share personal experiences with the next generation, and wanted a more stable and dependable job were many of the reasons given. Second, some of the experiences that the participants had as beginning teachers were feelings of being overwhelmed, frustrated,
happiness, goodness, and the love of one’s work. Third, many of the participants believed that the alternative route was a good experience, yet they found that they were not totally prepared for the classroom because of lack of materials, too many different levels in the classes, and lack of knowledge concerning classroom management.

Fourth, participants did not believe they were adequately trained to work with special education students. Fifth, many reasons were provided for motivation to stay. Wanting to share prior experiences with students, be a positive role model, financial reasons, impart their passion for the subject to their students, and having time for their own families. Last, two out of the eight participants reported that they would move out of the classroom within five years. However, they were not completely leaving education. Both want to pursue administration positions. Four of the 8 participants believed that they would remain in the classroom. One participant said that they would probably teach for 10 years, then pursue a Master’s in Theatre, with hopes of teaching in a post-secondary environment, and perform off-Broadway shows. The last participant was unsure of what she would be doing in the future. However, she did see herself teaching for at least another 10 years.

**Change of Career Secondary Teachers: Motivations, Expectations and Intentions**

Anthony and Ord (2008) interviewed New Zealand high school teachers to explore what or who motivated them to change their careers and enter the teaching profession. The self-selected sample of 68 recent secondary graduates (46 females and 22 males) from a teacher education program participated in the interview phases of the study. Each phase was conducted every 6 months for the first 2 years of teaching. There were four specific research questions investigated in this study:
Many of the participants had experiences either within their prior occupations, which when combined with role models, in the family, school, or as acquaintances, that appeared influential in their belief that they had what it takes to teach. Why the decision was made at a particular point differed among participants. Some were dissatisfied with their previous careers or had not considered teaching until they talked with someone who told them they should try it. Others expressed a long-held sense of becoming a teacher. Still, others stated that they thought they would be either a “good” teacher or that they would “enjoy” teaching.

Finally, teachers who came from other careers brought their prior occupational experiences with them as they transitioned into teaching. Many participants attempted to integrate their work experiences, such as familiarity with information and communication technologies, administration, team and presentation skills, into their curriculum and to establish credibility. In contrast, some participants stated that they believed administrators assumed a greater transferability of experiences, such as assuming that a writer knows how to teach writing, than was warranted.

The last three studies, Castro and Bauml (2009), Chong and Goh (2007), and Lerner and Zittleman (2002) are the least relevant to my research. All three published papers were conducted with participants who recently entered, were enrolled, or recently graduated from a teacher education program. Castro and Bauml (2009) conducted focus group interviews with 14 participants, selecting nine for follow-up interviews. Participants were new entrants into an alternative route teacher education program that required a minimum of nine hours of master-level coursework. Their goal was to find out why these career switchers chose to enter a teacher education program at this time in their life. Lerner and Zittleman (2002) administered structured surveys to 16 participants, all wanting to teach at the high school level, who were enrolled in or
had recently graduated from a teacher education program to see how they differed in their motivations and career experiences. Chong and Goh (2007) administered surveys to 80 post-graduates-in-education student teachers, followed by interviews with four participants from this sample, to find out why they chose teaching as a second career.

**Factors to Choosing Teaching as a Second Career**

Castro and Bauml (2009) focused on nontraditional students in teacher certification programs. They investigated the factors that influenced the timing of their decision to enter the teaching profession. Participants were teaching in a large urban school district in the Southwest. Castro and Bauml (2009) conducted a 2-hour focus group with 14 second-career teachers and then selected nine participants for 1-hour follow-up interviews.

The researchers drew two conclusions from their work. First, they concluded that access to resources influenced the timing of the decision to enter the teaching profession. These resources could be internal or external. Internal resources would include commitment readiness. Participants stated that they often fell back on their desire to become teachers when confronted with challenges. External resources included the means of meeting the financial cost, the support of family and co-workers, and flexible work schedules. Finally, the more knowledgeable about the profession the student was the more likely they were to choose a teaching career.

Second, availability of educational programs also contributed to their decision to enter the teaching profession. Participants commented that locating a certification program, registering, or attending certification classes can become obstacles to entering a teacher education program, so these obstacles can be lowered with more knowledge of the available programs.
Career Changers: Women (and Men) Who Switch to Teaching

Another study, Lerner and Zittleman (2002), examined 16 career switchers (7 females and 9 males) who were enrolled in or recently graduated from the teacher education program at the American University to examine how they differed in their motivations and career experiences. The participants ranged in age from the late 20s through their 50s. Participants answered a structured survey about their career motivations, obstacles encountered, and significant factors that brought them to teaching. Their methodology gave them a general idea of why these nontraditional participants switched careers.

When asked at what point in their life they decided to become a teacher, answers varied. One stated that it was when they were financially secure, while another stated that is was when their previous career was no longer rewarding. Others wanted to make a difference in children’s lives or stated that they were always interested in a teaching career. Participants also were asked if some person or event encouraged them to become a teacher. A common response was that they were inspired by a motivating teacher, such as high school teachers, coaches, or relatives who were teachers. For some, events such as September 11th caused a career reevaluation.

Participants had to rank their reasons or motivations to teach from a predetermined list of ten factors. The three most important responses were the same for both genders, enjoyment from working with children, value the subject area, and professional fulfillment. Remaining responses varied slightly. When asked where they saw themselves in 5-10 years, participants were asked to choose amongst teacher, school counselor, educational administrator, or other. The other category was not defined. All of the females expressed that they wanted to be in the classroom, but responses from the males varied. Their responses were 56%, 0%, 22%, and 22%, respectively.
Choosing Teaching as a Second Career in Singapore

Chong and Goh (2007) investigated key factors and reasons why career changers in Singapore choose teaching as a second career. The National Institute of Education (NIE), in Singapore, prepares all new teachers for the Singapore Education System. Chong is an Associate Dean of Curriculum Planning and Development, and Goh is an Associate Dean of Student Development and Liaison, both at NIE. A research survey was administered to 80 postgraduate-in-education student teachers who chose teaching as a second career. Four participants were then randomly selected for interviews.

The data revealed four main reasons why the 80 participants chose teaching as a second career. Passion for teaching and job factor or job fit were cited by 25% of the participants, followed by fulfilling a mission and love for children, with 22.5% and 20%, respectively. The remaining reasons, such as to answer a calling, for love of the subject, financial reasons, inspired by role models, teaching as a stepping stone, and others, were given by less than 7.5% of the others.

The distribution of males and females in the top four categories for choosing teaching as a second career were also noted. The top two categories for males were “to fulfill a mission” (50%) and “job factor or job fit” (33.33%). Interestingly, these two categories were at the bottom of the list for females, 14.52% and 21.58%, respectively. The top two categories for females were “passion for teaching” (30.65%) and “love for children” (23%). These two categories were at the bottom of the list for males (5.56% and 11.11%, respectively). The researchers stated that these findings indicate that second career male participants see teaching as fulfilling a mission (a calling) and that job fit is important to them. A contributing factor for the categories that the second career female participants selected may be seen as a more feminine
trait. It was concluded the participants showed that the altruistic and intrinsic motives far outweigh the extrinsic factors and are even more noticeable between sexes.

The studies presented above addressed nontraditional career switchers who decided to become teachers and their reasons for choosing the teaching profession. While researchers used different populations of participants, they did utilized similar methodologies, such as interviews, classroom observations, and journals. The participants in these studies gave similar reasons and had similar motivations for switching careers.

My study contributed to the literature using the portraiture methodology. This methodology allows the researcher to develop a subjective understanding of the participant.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the rationale for a qualitative study involving nontraditional teachers, who are now in their second year of teaching in a public school, based on the “essentialist approach” (Witz, Goodwin, Hart, & Thomas, 2001) followed by a discussion of the research design.

My original plan was to explore the impact that cooperating teachers had on novice teachers during their student teaching experience. I was particularly interested in the cooperating teacher’s influence on the participant’s decision to stay in teaching. Posner (1985) stated, “Probably the greatest influence on the quality of a field experience, particularly for the student teacher, is the cooperating teacher. In a sense, the student teacher is an apprentice and the cooperating teacher is a master teacher” (p. 43). After talking with my chair, Dr. Klaus Witz, we decided to conduct pilot work to see what questions to ask in the dissertation. After conducting four focus groups with two to three participants in each group, I decided to use the pilot work for the dissertation. Therefore, the focus groups became the initial data for the dissertation. Focus group discussions are effective in providing information about why people think the way they do. Focus groups also allow for group interactions and for varying viewpoints of the topic (Krueger, 1994, p. 3). Because I primarily wanted to know if and why the teachers thought they were going to stay in education, we decided to talk with second year teachers. Second year teachers might have an idea if they were planning on staying or not. Darling-Hammond (2003) has identified the first year as the time that often determines whether a person will stay in teaching.

The participants in my focus groups were nontraditional students when they acquired their teaching certificate. The traditional student is typically described as a young adult ranging
in age from 21 to 23, while the nontraditional student typically comes from other careers having more life experiences and may be in their 40s and 50s (Podsen, 2002). Other researchers find that the typical age range describing traditional students is 18 to 24 years and nontraditional students are usually 25 or older (Hoyt et al., 2010). For the purpose of this study, I define a nontraditional student as an adult over the age of 24 who usually have work experience and possibly another degree, since the program the participants graduated from gives this definition.

After conducting one focus group, it was surprisingly clear that cooperating teachers did not seem to influence why the participants were staying. Cooperating teachers had little effect on them. In fact, I found out that the participants pardoned their cooperating teachers for any wrongdoings, yet spoke highly of them when they did do something they found helpful. Whether the cooperating teacher was good or bad, inspiring or not, participants knew that they wanted to be in education. They were mature enough to make their own decisions, and these participants were all in the same situation. They were abandoning previous careers. I then conducted additional focus groups of teachers who were nontraditional students. Because the focus groups provided me with the discussion I needed to answer my research questions, I concluded that I would be able to write portraits using only the focus group information and one or three follow-up interviews.

The participants in my focus groups got along well. There was automatic collaboration within the groups, and the participants were acting as if they had been friends for a long time. One possible reason for this is that a couple of them had been in cohorts together during their year and a half of course work. Another possible reason for this level of collaboration is their similar goal of obtaining teacher certification in spite of differences in their backgrounds.

Another possible reason could be that each of the participants had me as their professor for one
to three education method courses. Krueger (1994) stated, “the discussion is comfortable and often enjoyable for participants as they share their ideas and perceptions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion” (p. 6). It became clear that I should continue with focus groups, followed by follow-up interviews. Since my focus groups got along so well and freely shared their stories, I would only have to do one or two follow-up interviews.

The purpose of the study was to find out how a nontraditional second year teacher knows that he or she is going to stay in teaching. My participants were interested in my research and excited about being a part of it. They understood that the results could improve a university’s education program and demonstrate to elementary and middle school administrators that nontraditional teachers could be valuable to have as part of their teaching staff. I collected data on nine participants and then wrote eight portraits, four long and four shorter. Then I wrote a cross-case discussion on eight of the participants. I only included participants who thought they were staying in teaching.

**Research Design**

My research design evolved from the focus groups just described. Accordingly, the design for this dissertation was to select nine 2nd-year teachers who were nontraditional students, engage participants in small focus groups that explored their decision to pursue teaching as a second career and their reasoning for staying in the teaching profession. Following these group discussions, teachers participated in one to three individual follow-up interviews that added additional understanding to each case.

**Focus Groups.** Traditionally, focus groups are used to gather information on significant issues and viewpoints regarding the topic. Focus groups are a common method used in
qualitative research as they offer insight into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants. Additionally, focus groups are conducted in a natural environment; therefore, participants are influenced by each other. It is commonly used when the researcher tries to find out the major issues that the participants are experiencing in an area (Krueger, 1994). The participants in my first focus group were sure of their career decision. I did not know what the issues were, yet I still wanted to know why in their second year of teaching they were so sure they were going to stay in teaching. Focus groups are a natural methodology to explore these issues.

I wanted the focus groups to be small so I could engage participation in an open discussion of their experiences. Focus groups ranged from two to three participants. I believe that is one reason why I found the participants comfortably commenting and responding in the conversation. I also wanted a non-directive approach in which their feelings could emerge. I did not want the participants to only provide me with information. Krueger (1994) stated:

Focus group interviews were born out of necessity. In the late 1930s, social scientists began investigating the value of nondirective individual interviewing as an improved source of information…The traditional individual interview, which used a predetermined questionnaire with close-ended response choices, had a major disadvantage: The respondent was limited by the choices offered and therefore the findings could be unintentionally influenced by the interviewer by oversight or omission…In contrast, nondirective interviews use open-ended questions and allow individuals to respond without setting boundaries or providing clues for potential response categories. (p. 7)

Witz (2006) contrasted the “interviewing for information” and “interviewing for feeling, consciousness, and overall state:”

In interviewing for information, the focus would be on the story…. I might encourage the student to elaborate what happened and probe to clarify … there would be a common understanding that the important thing was to get the student’s story…. 
In interviewing for feeling, consciousness, or subjective state, I would try to avoid such stereotypic categories and to subjectively understand, as well as I was able, the participant’s attitudes, values, and whole experience. In addition, I would try to encourage the student to express herself or himself naturally and freely so that these things could be seen as parts of larger aspects of the student as a person. To develop this kind of understanding would require as much or more objective information than if I interviewed only for information. But the focus would be on the feeling, the subjective state. (pp. 247-248)

My research interest focused on why nontraditional participants are sure they were going to stay in teaching fits into the “interviewing for feeling” definition. Whether I was conducting a focus group or a follow-up interview, I wanted to explore the participant’s subjective experiences and feelings. Subjective characteristics are from someone’s point of view (feelings, opinions, emotions, or beliefs) which perhaps can be altered into objective (factual, observable, or knowledge) characteristics.

Initially, I carried out four focus groups. The data from these four groups was used in the dissertation. In these groups, I acted as a facilitator of the discussion amongst the group. My goal was to create rapport between or among the participants so that they would feel comfortable enough to share openly in that setting. Each participant had to feel that his or her comments were respected. While I had defined objectives, the conversation in a focus group was somewhat free flowing, but not to the point that the conversation got too far off track. If it did, I as the facilitator must bring it back, while still exploring the ideas that diverged from the conversation. While I knew the topics that needed to be covered, my goal was to foster the conversation between or among the participants, having them talk with each other without me asking each question. My hope was for them to bring up incidents without me mentioning them. If something was not covered, I asked them about it, so the discussion was comfortable and often enjoyable for participants as they shared their stories (Krueger, 1994). Each focus group lasted
for approximately 1½-2 hours, and all were audiotaped and transcribed. The following table lists the participants (all pseudonyms) of this study. All were Caucasian.

Table 3

Participants of the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (Pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Current Age &amp; Sex</th>
<th>First Major If Different From Education</th>
<th>Education Degree or Certification</th>
<th>Work Experiences Before Teaching</th>
<th>Current Teaching Level - Second Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>41 Female</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Certification</td>
<td>Banking – Investment Advisor</td>
<td>8th grade math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>35 Female</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cup factory; nursing home; waitress; teacher’s aide</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzanne</td>
<td>48 Female</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>Certification</td>
<td>Home daycare; real estate; waitress</td>
<td>6th &amp; 7th grade social studies, language arts, and math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>35 Male</td>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>Certification</td>
<td>Farmer; Basketball Coach Retail</td>
<td>7th &amp; 8th grade language arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandy</td>
<td>29 Female</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8th grade math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary</td>
<td>50 Female</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Food Service Industry</td>
<td></td>
<td>6th grade science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>27 Female</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Food Service Industry</td>
<td></td>
<td>7th &amp; 8th grade special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizbeth</td>
<td>27 Female</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Second Degree</td>
<td>Technical Academy; Park District Track Coach</td>
<td>4th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>31 Female</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Daycare; Child Care</td>
<td></td>
<td>6th grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The meeting with each focus group began with informal, brief introductions and informing them of my rationale for the study, followed by each participant sharing what they were currently doing in education. By sharing this information, the teachers felt more comfortable expressing their personal stories. After establishing a relaxed atmosphere, which happened almost instantly with my focus groups, I asked a couple of questions to get them interacting with each other.
**Follow-Up Interviews.** I wanted to understand each case on its own and how it was that the participants later went into teaching, which often occurred after a first career. I was also interested in learning why participants felt that they would continue in the teaching profession. Even after seeing the public school system with both the positive and negative sides, they are sure they wanted to stay in education. After the focus groups, I conducted one to three one-on-one follow-up interviews, which elicited a fuller account of their story. These interviews allowed me to consider the participants’ responses and to pursue more in-depth information around any issues that were mentioned during the focus group. Using the responses from the focus groups and follow-up interviews, I then developed eight portraits.

Therefore, my design included one to three individual follow-up interviews, with the purpose of exploring the participants’ work experiences before they went into education. In addition, the interviews explored their interests in education, starting possibly from childhood, their personal experiences, their decision to change careers, and their thoughts on staying in education. If brief additional questions were needed, I performed member checking by email. Member checking permitted me the opportunity to understand and review what participants intended to say, obtain clarification, and allow participants to volunteer additional information.

**Portraits and Cross Case Discussions.** After carrying out the follow-up interviews and any member checking, I developed portraits to get a sense of participant’s feelings, that teaching is the right profession. The portraits were followed by a cross-case discussion that focused on larger pieces that came into view across all of the participants. Still knowing that each participant holds their own story, I looked for matters that were common among a few of the participants. In a larger discussion, I identified how it was that these participants were sure they are going to stay in teaching.
The focus groups and follow-up interviews were productive. My goal was to be a facilitator who let the conversation be free flowing so that the participants could express themselves. I concluded that this was an appropriate methodology for this study.

**Concept of “Portraiture”**

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) developed the concept of “portraiture,” a phrase used for a method of inquiry and documentation in the social sciences. She (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) described portraits as:

The portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences. The portraits are shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one participating in the drawing of the image. The encounter between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and is crucial to the success and authenticity of the rendered piece. (p. 3)

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) had two experiences that formed the basis for “portraiture” by describing two painted portraits of her. The first was a hurried sketch of her at age eight as she sat in her mother’s rock garden, and the other was an oil painting that required several weeks of sitting in a studio, made when she was in her mid-20s. After seeing the completed portrait, months later, she was shocked, disappointed, and in awe all in the same moment.

In both cases, she believed that the drawing or painting both looked like her and did not look like her, rendered her from one viewpoint and many viewpoints, was a picture of her and of her heritage through her mother and grandmother. Each drawing portrayed her in ways that were different from the ways she saw herself. Each rendered her “from the inside out.” Using these experiences, she, as a sociologist, wanted to develop “portraits” of others in “words.” She wanted to research people and situations “from the inside out” (1983). She (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) wrote:
I learned, for example, that these portraits did not capture me as I saw myself; that they were not like looking in the mirror at my reflection. Instead they seemed to capture my essence—qualities of character and history some of which I was unaware of, some of which I resisted mightily, some of which felt deeply familiar. But the translation of image was anything but literal. It was probing, layered, and interpretive. In addition to portraying my image, the piece expressed the perspective of the artist and was shaped by the evolving relationship between the artist and me. I also recognized that in searching for the essence, in moving beyond the surface image, the artist was both generous and tough, both skeptical and receptive. I was never treated as an object…. I learned, as well, that the portraits expressed a haunting paradox, of a moment in time and of timelessness. In the portrait of the young woman for example, I could see myself at twenty five but I could also see my ancestors and the children in my future. Time seemed to move through this still and silent portrait of a woman, rendering the piece—now twenty five years later—both anachronistic and contemporary. It is still a vital document of who I am (and who I may become) even if it no longer looks like me. (p. 4)

Portraits were further developed by Witz and associates (Witz, 2006; Witz et al., 2001).

Witz (2006) wrote:

The individual case portrait is the basic unit of understanding in the investigator and also the basic unit in communicating this understanding to the reader. In part this reflects the fact (or rather, my experience) that the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of a human being show an absolutely extraordinary unity…The portrait then tries to point to the source(s) of this unity, or the “inner unity” … which pervades the person and is responsible for the more outward manifestations of the person as a unity. (pp. 258-259)

**Essentialist Approach**

Both in conducting interviews and in constructing portraits, I used the essentialist approach. Witz (2006) advanced the essentialist portrait. He described some of the characteristics of the methodology, as “interviewing for feeling with the participant as ally and co-contemplator, conceptually developed essentialist portrait, and cross-case discussion” (p. 246).

The essentialist approach (Witz, 2006; Witz et al., 2001) is appropriate for examining deeper aspects of a nontraditional second year teacher and their journey to where they are today.
in their career. This methodology is in agreement with what is being developed in this study
(Witz et al., 2001):

[The essentialist methodology] is distinguished [from the stereotypic narrative] by the fact that the investigator attempts to develop a personal subjective understanding of the phenomenon of interest in different individuals by way of sustained attempts to share, empathetically and sympathetically, the individual’s feeling, state of mind and past experience, both during the interview and in many re-hearings of the tapes afterward..... The investigator attempts to get at the essence of the phenomenon in the individual, as that phenomenon is subjectively felt by the individual, by feeling that same essence intuitively in himself or herself, as part of [the investigator’s] self, and then communicating it to the reader. Thus, the methodology involves, first, deep intuitive understandings which one then ‘feels’ as distinctive qualitative new aspects, or as a kind of nature, entity or ‘essence’ in oneself. The methodology involves, secondly, considerable conceptual and imaginative shaping and development of these aspects or entities, as well as literary techniques to communicate them to the reader so that they may become objects of discussion. (pp. 197-198)

The aim was to develop the essence of each participant by having them take a look inside themselves for a sense and an understanding of what they believe, regardless of whether they can justify it. It may mean cutting through the depth of the surface to acquire understanding from deep within. Furthermore,

The investigator’s aim is to convey the nature and quality of the feeling, consciousness, state of the participant that she (the investigator) intuitively realized in herself, so the reader can feel it too and can see how it is part of the essence of the participant, rather than to only describe it with and thereby subsume it under a few already existing categories. The aim is to bring out the exact quality, shape of the feeling, consciousness etc., which constitutes the distinctive structuring. (Witz, 2007, p. 94)

The overall approach to analyze the data from the focus group and follow-up interviews in this study was the “grounded theory” approach. A grounded theory is arrived at inductively, with no preconceived theory. Rather, themes emerge from the data, which are grouped into concepts and relationships and lead to the development of a theory that can be tested and refined (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The essentialist approach is one method of gathering this data.
Principles of Constructing Portraits

To get insight into each of my participants and construct a portrait of them, I listened repeatedly to the audio tapes and reread transcripts, trying to create a picture of each one of them. This helped as I attempted to better understand, interpret, and evaluate what was said. It was also important to take notice of any change in volume, tone, or speed, along with any moments of silence or sudden laughs. Making a timeline also helped with the organization of the portrait, as a researcher can select the events that are the most important to the study and then put into a portrait. The participants shared their story, maybe even pulling things out of their memory that they had not thought about for years. I tried to think like an artist, looking at things more closely and finding beauty in everything, along with making connections. I attempted to make the reader feel like the participant in the portrait was sitting right there. The reader should feel like they know the participant as I took the participants’ excerpts and added my interpretations. Witz (2006) suggested:

The alive passages and subjective aspects that one has identified (augmented by distinctive expressions, resonances, etc.) become one’s initial isolated islands of subjective understanding, the initial indications of what the forces and sources in the subjective experience, consciousness, and world of the participant might be like. Next, one tries to get an idea and a feeling of how all this might fit into some kind of larger picture of the participant’s experience. (p. 252)

This is what the methodology does. To convey to the reader the participants’ experiences, I continually reworked the data until I saw the essential image. The methodology is distinguished by using long quotes or significant passages where the participant gives an account of herself/himself. These significant passages are displayed in Chapter Four. After constructing a partial portrait, I found that this worked for my study. Therefore, I tried to elicit any specific details or incidents that might be important. I also explained aspects of each participant’s characteristics in such a way the reader acquires an understanding of the participant. The reader
gets a glimpse into a mirror of the participant’s life. I portrayed eight participants in Chapter 4, trying to describe each one so that the reader would get a depth of insight into the participant’s personality.

**Participant as Ally and Co-Contemplator**

This study took a step into being acquainted genuinely with each participant. In order to do this, the researcher must become an ally. Patton (1980) believed:

> I’m personally convinced that to be a good interviewer you must like doing it. This means taking an interest in what people have to say. You must yourself believe that the thoughts and experiences of the people being interviewed are worth knowing. In short, you must have the utmost respect for these persons who are willing to share with you some of their time to help you understand their world. (p. 252)

This is what being an ally is like. As I reflected on my work, I could relate to Patton. The time spent with my participants, both in the focus group interview and during the follow-up interview, seemed like informal conversations. I would paraphrase or listen for feelings they might describe as the underlying emotion.

The conversation among the participants and the researcher in the focus groups or between the researcher and the participant in the follow-up interviews resembles a chat, where the participant or participants may forget that they are being interviewed. Witz (2006) wrote:

> If the participant is to become an ally in the research, the investigator needs to feel that the research topic is important in a larger scheme of things and to share with the participant from the very beginning the thrust of the research and the larger societal, disciplinary, or human concerns that motivate it. If the participant recognizes that the investigator is serving a larger cause to which the participant is at least somewhat sympathetic, the participant will feel that he or she can bring in freely whatever feelings, values, and past experience are important to the topic at hand (within limits of course), and cooperation will tend to develop between them in a natural way. (p. 248)

As the researcher, I wanted the participants to understand my rationale for doing the study and hoped that they would feel a desire about the topic. I also wanted to know their
feelings and perspectives to yield information. As I showed interest and respect for what was being said, they were able to express themselves freely. In the focus groups, I would occasionally rephrase what was said to insure that I completely understood. Together we were working as a team. Because I had the participants in one or more courses, I already had good rapport with them, and they easily opened up in the focus groups. In fact, the ally philosophy was naturally being met in the focus groups because they were excited. I saw that they shared and had the sense that they were all in the same place. Having the focus groups possibly made them allies because they were all in the same situation with having work experience and now they were going to a new level of fulfillment.

**Site**

All of the participants came from the same site – a small, private, comprehensive university located in a metropolitan area of 100,000 residents and a city population of 85,000. Approximately 2,400 students attend the institution, with approximately 490 enrolled in teacher preparation programs. Eighty-two percent of the students were in-state students, mostly local, many of them from the surrounding small towns and area. Eighteen percent were out-of-state students, representing 37 states altogether and nine countries. The most popular majors at the university are biology, education, music, theatre, business, and nursing.

**Traditional Program**

For education, students may choose to earn a Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Arts degree in either Early Childhood Education or Elementary Education. Courses are primarily taken during the day Monday through Friday. Internships are built into the courses so that students are placed in the local schools for observation hours. The degree’s culminating experience is 16 weeks of student teaching. Various exams are taken throughout and near the
end of the degree to become certified to teach. Elementary education students may become certified to teach in a subject area in middle school by choosing to take two additional courses and an additional content area exam. The university also offers a degree in Secondary Education in math, chemistry, social studies, or English.

**Accelerated Program**

The accelerated program is designed for nontraditional students who may have previous work experience, possibly even another degree or college credits. Students are primarily drawn from the local area. However, the university does have two offsite locations within a 60-mile radius. The adult program has existed for nine years. Many of the students have family and job responsibilities. Just as the traditional students, they may earn a Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Arts degree in either Early Childhood Education or Elementary Education. If they already have a bachelor’s degree, they may opt to be certified without obtaining another degree. This involves taking all required education courses. Courses within the accelerated program are offered in a 5-week format with students attending one night a week for four hours and one course at a time. Course credit is equivalent between the traditional and the accelerated programs. Generally, coursework takes 18 months to complete. Internships are built into the program. In an internship, the nontraditional students are assigned to public schools for a set amount of hours per semester. Because they conclude with 16 weeks of student teaching, they usually have to quit their job, especially if they work fulltime. Various exams are taken throughout and near the end of the degree program to earn their teacher certificate. Elementary education students are required to take the two middle school courses. Therefore, it is not an option like it is for the traditional students, but they may choose not to take a middle school endorsement exam in their area of focus.
Participant Selection and Recruitment

Selection. To become a participant the person had to be (a) in their second year of full-time teaching at a public school and would have signed a contract with their district, (b) a nontraditional education student and (c) still living in the area. As stated earlier in this chapter, I define a nontraditional student as an adult over the age of 24 who usually have work experience and possibly another degree, since the program the participants graduated from gives this definition.

Recruitment. Because I teach in the School of Education at the site for this study, education students in the accelerated program enroll in one to three of my method courses. The participants were drawn from courses that I have taught so they knew me very well, and I knew they were nontraditional. Altogether, I sent 15 emails to potential participants, indicating the criteria and rationale for the study. I received 12 responses, with nine potential immediate participants. Two said they would participate if needed, but that they were extremely busy in their master’s degree programs. One was willing to participate but had a time conflict when the focus group met. I never heard from the other three, who may have not received my email or chose not to respond.

Data Collection Analysis and Write-Ups

In analyzing the data, I transcribed the dialogue from the focus groups to get a perspective on each participant’s story. From the 9 participants, I chose 8 to write up into individual portraits. I did not write one portrait because I could not get a sufficiently unified coherent larger impression to make a single story about one participant. One to three one-on-one follow-up interviews of each of the participants were necessary for any uncertainties and additional information that I might need to pursue. Member checking through email occurred for
additional clarification and to further increase truthfulness. Once the portrait was complete, the
participant and I met to check the portrait for accuracy.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

The portraits were followed by a cross-case discussion that focused on larger aspects that
emerged from all participants. Witz (2007) suggested, “a cross-case discussion should be a
discussion in a spirit of ‘now that I have looked deeply at these individual cases, what general
issues, phenomena, and perspectives emerge from this with respect to the phenomenon
studied?’” (p. 90). In this analysis, I tried to be familiar with each participant and expand any
one-sided understandings and to see the greater happenings that flowed among the mind, heart,
and soul of each of them, developing them into larger perceptions.
CHAPTER 4
PORTRAITS

In this chapter, I present the portraits of eight of my participants individually to provide the reader with a clear image of each of them. The portraits are intended to give the reader a sense of each participant’s life situations, personality, consciousness, and feelings. Having been an instructor in the School of Education for the last twelve years, all of the participants in this study have been in one to three of my method courses. Therefore, I had already established a good rapport with them and had known them for about four years.

Suzanne

Suzanne is a white female who is soft spoken and has a caring personality. She is a single mother of two. Her daughter is nine years old, and her son is 23 and lives on his own. I remember her as a smart, conscientious student who was sure of herself and knew what she wanted. In her late 40s, she began a new career. She is currently teaching middle school, teaching math, social studies, and language arts. Not only does she have her elementary education degree, but she also has a bachelor’s degree in business administration, which she earned eight years earlier. She has plans of getting her master’s degree in education in the near future.

In the focus group, Suzanne introduced herself to the others by saying, “Mine is a huge back story, so we won’t even get into the whole thing right now” (focus group, p. 1). In this “huge back story” there are two prominent aspects that took me some time to understand. One is, to her, to live right, and this means that the welfare of her kids is the overruling value. She subordinates all of her career activities to the welfare of “being there for her kids.” The other aspect was a constant inner engagement with education – a questioning of what education was,
what was taught in school and why, what college involved, and why one should go to college. The story of both of these aspects starts in her childhood.

**First Girl to Graduate High School – “I Didn’t Know What to Do.”** Suzanne was in my first focus group of three participants. She did not know the other two, since she had not been in the same cohort as them, but was a similar type student being nontraditional. However, it did not take long for an alliance to develop amongst the group. I initially began by asking the group, “What are you currently doing in education?” After her “huge back story” comment she went on to share what she is currently teaching in the town where she lives.

From the focus group, I knew nobody from her family had graduated from high school.

(1) In junior high, I remember just being lost. I didn’t know what was going on half of the time, but my family was not educated. Nobody graduated from high school. My mom and dad’s goal was to just graduate from high school. That was the biggest accomplishment our family could muster. So I grew up thinking, man, if I graduate from high school that is the best thing ever. Then I graduated from high school, and I was the first female in my family. But it took a while to get up and running in the whole college thing. That was my delay there. I had no idea what to do. (focus group, p. 2)

I knew that she had this long history of taking a number of courses here and there in college and finally got a bachelor’s degree in business administration. Only after that did she turn to teaching. Looking at the information I had about her and the information from the focus group, I noticed that in all her many moves she always seemed to make arrangements so that she could take care of her kids.

Therefore, I started the follow-up interview by talking about how I listened to the tape from her focus group and how I heard her talk about how she had this job and then there was this opportunity and then this job and this opportunity. The only thing that I could see that was

1 The significant passages that I mentioned in Chapter 3 are displayed and numbered in each portrait consecutively.
constant was her kids, and I thought that everything always seemed to revolve around them or their needs or depended on them, so I asked her if she would talk a bit about that. At first I thought that she didn’t answer my question, but actually she did in a much larger way.

(2) I don’t remember if I mentioned or not that growing up the focus was not on education because my family was not academic minded. Neither one of my parents graduated from high school. My mom recently went and got her GED…. But growing up, being the only daughter, my objective was to graduate high school … and to get married and have kids. That was how I was raised. I never thought about going on to college. I wasn’t raised that way. So after I graduated high school all of my friends were going to college, and I was like what do I do. [R commented for clarification.] … It wasn’t on my radar at all because I didn’t grow up with having that as a goal. My brother was the first in the family to graduate high school on either side…. Even the high school counselors had me on the graduating high school track because I never brought it up to them that I wanted to do anything other than graduate high school. I went to a huge high school…. They targeted the top 10% of our class, and I wasn’t in the top 10…. Once I graduated high school I went to find a job, and when I had my son it was a matter of how can I work around him to provide and have the food on the table and still be there for him.

R: You told me before that you weren’t married, right?

S: Right. I was not married. The goal was to take care of him (her son) and not have someone else raise him. It was very important to me. It was not an easy thing to do, being a single mom. I had my mom to help out, but not to depend on so much…Even until now my focus is having a job where my family life can be first. When I was pregnant with my daughter I didn’t want somebody else raising her. I didn’t want to be gone 50 hours a week or more and have her in a daycare. So what job can I have so that I can be there the majority of the time? Always in the back of my mind I wanted to be a teacher, but never had the confidence in myself to do it. Everything kind of came together when she (her daughter) was pretty young. The thought was there that that’s what I want to do… (follow-up interview #1, pp. 1 & 2)

She did answer my question, midway through the whole quote, “Once I graduated high school I went to find a job…. It was a matter of how can I work around him to provide and have the food on the table and still be there for him.” This is in a completely matter of fact tone, as if almost everybody would feel that way in those circumstances. Not only did she want to provide for
him, as so many parents do, but she wanted to “be there for him.” She doesn’t even think about this, everything in her world says this is what you do. When I ask her for clarification whether she was married at that time, she expands on “providing” and “being there for him.” “It was very important to me. It was not an easy thing to do, being a single mom.” Not only was she not married; however, she was the only one there for him. In fact, now that she thinks of it, she is still that way today. When she had her daughter, fourteen years later, “I didn’t want somebody else raising her. I didn’t want to be gone 50 hours a week or more and have her in a daycare” (middle of excerpt 2). She genuinely feels for her children and cares for them. That is a main reason why she is teaching today. She can be there for her daughter after school.

Why then did she have to tell me all the things in the first paragraph before she started answering me? Before responding so clearly to my question she found it necessary to explain how she grew up, graduated from high school, and took a job (first third of excerpt 2). To some extent, it was to take me into her world. There was more in her world than just taking care of the kids. She wanted me to understand how she grew up, to know her values, her perspectives, and her horizons.

What struck me, actually, was that she wanted to “be there for him” and “to take care of him.” In hindsight, yes, she always arranged everything, her business, and educational opportunities, so she could “be there for him.” However, I still needed to know more clearly how education came in. “After I graduated high school, all of my friends were going to college, and I was like what do I do” (middle of excerpt 2). “Always in the back of my mind I wanted to be a teacher, but never had the confidence in myself to do it” (end of excerpt 2). It seemed the big thing to her was graduating from high school. Then, of course, there would have to be getting a job and having kids. Nevertheless, she saw everybody else was going to college, and
she started wondering what this college all about was. During high school, she could not imagine anything bigger than graduating. She had just done the biggest thing by graduating from high school and now her friends are going to college. She did not understand what they were teaching at college or why one would go. Even if she had found out that you need a college degree to get a job, it would not have meant anything to her because she did not know what college entailed. Occasionally, she would think about being a teacher in the back of her mind. After high school, she was working a variety of jobs. She thought there was something there with college, but she did not understand what it was.

I did not realize it, but Suzanne herself had the very same issues in mind and gave me an overview with what happened as she continued talking in quote 2 and answered the very thoughts of mine. “Everything kind of came together when she (her daughter) was pretty young. The thought was there that that’s what I want to do” (follow-up interview #1, p. 2). She continued to talk with me about how it was that indeed she didn’t know how to relate to college and how finally “everything came together.” But, “everything came together” after 18 years. She had both of her children, divorced, and graduated from college before “everything came together.”

**Brief Moves to Take Courses to Find out What College is About.** After graduating from high school, Suzanne spent several years working an array of jobs and taking various courses.

(3) After high school I worked a year, and then I took some courses. [She moved to a different city in her home state.] I lived off campus, which was a mistake.... I lived with one of my best friends from high school. She had lived there a year and she knew where everything was, and then we had two other roommates that she had met her first year. [R clarified that she took courses fulltime for one semester.]

R: Did you think about what you were going to major in?
S: No. It was go and get started, and there was no thought process. I ended up dropping all of the classes before the semester ended. It was too much. I wasn’t ready. I didn’t know what I was getting myself into. The environment off campus was not conducive to studying. It wasn’t academically appropriate. It was not a good situation, but I ended up living down there for another year. (follow-up interview #1, pp. 2 & 3)

Perhaps she was trying to find out what other people saw in college, and this was her stab at it. Obviously she had gone about it in completely wrong ways. Nobody had talked with her about college or her interests.

Following that year and a half, she moved back to her hometown. “There was a whole lifetime between my son being born and high school” (follow-up interview #1, p. 3). Another year and a half later, she quit her job at the state park to move out east to live with a long distance boyfriend. Even though things were going well she only stayed a year. Another old boyfriend from home kept calling. “It was just like everything you want in a boyfriend when I was gone, when I was unattainable... I gave up this job [at a girl’s home] that I loved to come back for him. We went out a few times, and I got pregnant and he was out the door. How many times did I fall for it? Not again” (follow-up interview #2, p. 13).

Suzanne now has a completely new life that centers around her son. When he was about six months old, she made another brief attempt at college by taking two general education courses at a nearby university. She also took classes to get a real estate license, and then sold real estate for about a year and a half. However, the real estate business was not going very well. She had a conversation with her brother who was stationed out west in the military and, at that point, it looked like moving near him would be best. She was not losing anything by leaving the real estate business. “It worked out really nice. I had him if I needed him. It was an
opportunity. It was a risk, but it was the best decision I ever made. It changed the way I looked at things” (follow-up interview #1, p. 3).

Soon after she started living out west, she had a significant conversation with her brother.

(4) I remember ... sitting in the park. I really from growing up just felt defeated and like there was no opportunity for me to do anything and then being a single mom just brings you down even more. He just looked at me and said you can do whatever you want to do. That’s it. I was like you know what, you’re right. I can. That kind of set me on that path to college and striving to do better. (follow-up interview #1, p. 3)

She constantly judged the opportunities that came her way and analyzed everything. Even though being a single mom was challenging, raising her son was not negotiable. The conversation with her brother made her aware that she could do whatever she wanted to do, including going to college. She was sure of herself and knew what she wanted. She made practical decisions, and for the next three semesters, she went to college full time and majored in liberal arts. I could hear the excitement in her voice. “It was amazing there. That was a great experience” (follow-up interview #1, p. 3). The three semesters showed her what college was about.

Things soon changed for Suzanne.

(5) My son’s dad reappeared and you know. It was all puppies and cupcakes. We smoothed things over, and we got back together. Our son was four and a half. We decided to move to [a central state] because that was where he was from. It made it easier for everybody. (follow-up interview #1, p. 3)

Suzanne moved back in high spirits, filled with confidence, and “puppies and cupcakes,” but elsewhere she had already filled that period as 11 years not in touch with herself. College was now her top priority. She shared her frustration.

(6) That was part of the deal. If I move ... and give up this, I’m finishing my bachelor’s degree.... That was my goal. That was the discussion. I want to stay here [out west] because I have it good here. I love where I’m at. I love what I’m doing. But he didn’t have a job there. He didn’t know anybody. It was easier for him to be close to
his family and with his job. We decided to move back, but I said if I do I’m finishing school. I don’t care how much it cost. I was interested in that whole liberal arts thing because it lent itself to my personality and my interests.” (follow-up interview #1, p. 4)

**Not in Touch with Herself, but Getting Grounded in College.** Things did not turn out like Suzanne hoped when she moved back. That was the start of an uncomfortable feeling.

“Really in retrospect I lost myself from 1991 when we moved back [from out west] until 2001 when we divorced” (follow-up interview #1, p. 7). After the move, she worked as a waitress for a couple of years before starting at the community college.

When we met for the second follow-up interview, she mentioned repeatedly the payoff that came from moving back with her boyfriend.

(7) …There was a payoff…at first, you know…the plan was that we were moving in together and it was going to be a family situation…He forgot to tell me he had another one [baby] on the way…. [Her son] was already attached and ready to live this life and all these promises…. Obviously, the payoff was that I …worked nights and had my days with my son. After a couple of years…I was able to go to school fulltime, finish at [the community college] and then I worked a couple of years and then went to [the university] full time without working. There was a definite payoff. (follow-up interview #2, p. 6)

Even though the relationship caused her distress, there was a payoff. School would have been a financial struggle if she were not in the relationship. She was economically dependent upon him. Besides, she could provide better for their son when they were all living together. She also thought it was the right thing to do, too. Their son was definitely excited to have his father in the picture.

When Suzanne had started college again, she had insisted on a liberal arts degree, but her boyfriend [they were not married at the time] did not agree and wanted her to choose a different major, one that he thought would produce an income. She accommodated him and looked into getting a business degree. Within two years, she graduated with two different associate’s
degrees; Business Administration and Business Management, but had no plans to work in the area of business. By the time she graduated, she and her boyfriend had gotten custody of his 4½-year-old daughter. She may not have been very happy with the situation, but she accepted it and made the child her own.

Three years after earning her two associate’s degrees, when their son was 11 years old and her boyfriend’s daughter was seven, she started to get her bachelor’s degree in Business Education. This was her first thought of becoming a teacher. However, shortly after starting the university dropped the program, so she decided to earn a degree in Business Administration, even though she still had no intentions of working in business. “I never thought I would knock the world off its feet in the business world, but I really think it is something that everybody needs to know. I think any job that I would get, it would be beneficial” (follow-up interview #2, p. 3). She experienced several major life events during each of the four semesters while attending the university, some happy and others not so pleasant. Her boyfriend’s father passed away, she and her boyfriend bought a house, they married, and the last semester she found out that she was pregnant but had a miscarriage the day before graduation. Therefore, graduation day was filled with mixed emotions, and major changes were on the horizon.

A New Spirit. Within the several months of graduating with her bachelor’s degree, Suzanne had become pregnant again. She realized midway through her pregnancy that her marriage was falling apart. Her husband’s abusiveness was escalating during this time. Because of his abusiveness, he quickly lost custody of his daughter from the previous relationship. His new daughter was born at the same time that he was going through the custody battle. During this period, Suzanne was coming to terms that her husband was going to move out and her marriage was not going to last. From that point on there was a tacit assumption, “I will go into
teaching when my daughter is big enough.” I did not know this until we met for the second follow-up interview.

(8) …I had pretty much decided that I wanted to get into teaching, and I don’t remember exactly when it happened. Probably when I was pregnant, would be my guess. Because while I was pregnant, really was…the end of my marriage. I was trying to strategize and figure out, if I’m a single mom again, how am I going to juggle that having a small child and being able to support myself…. I think that in the back of my mind for a long time I wanted to be a teacher, but I never thought that I was smart enough. But then when I graduated [with her bachelor’s degree] that really gave me a boost… (follow-up interview #2, p. 1)

Within weeks of their daughter being born, her husband left. “Puppies and cupcakes” was over (displayed quote 5). It took two to three years to finalize the divorce. She was living off of support and by the time her daughter was six months old she was running a home daycare.

“The marriage took a lot out of me. I mean he had a very abusive personality, which is what led to the divorce. He just really took me down. When he was gone I just kind of got myself back” (follow-up interview #1, p. 2).

When her daughter turned 5, she became aware of the teacher education program.

(9) …I had a conversation in the library one day with a future classmate because I had been looking for some kind of a program to get my certification (to teach) without being gone too much. At that time I was doing home daycare so I could provide and be home with my daughter…. [The program] was one night a week. It was the first cohort in our area. We started late because the program hadn’t gotten under way yet. It was fulltime craziness. A lot of late nights. A lot of sleeplessness and stress. We got on target and finished it. (follow-up interview #1, p. 2)

The timing of this chance conversation and the time to apply to this program was perfect.

(10) The timing was perfect actually. I had it in the back of my mind for a long time, but I didn’t think I could do it. But, when I graduated [with her bachelor’s degree] and had [her daughter], the timing was just right. I felt at that point if I could graduate from [the university], holy cow. I just needed to stop myself. Stop the negative thoughts. I could deal with it. I could handle it” (follow-up interview #2, p. 2)
Despite the full-time craziness, going to school in this program was what college was all about. All of her desires were being fulfilled. When she went to school before and got her business degree that was not fulfillment. Now she was really a student. She studied what she wanted to do, teaching. I had asked her during the focus group why she wanted to get into teaching.

(11) …I love school. I love school. I loved being a student and being in that atmosphere all of the time. When I was in high school and at first in college I didn’t get it, but when I started back seriously, I loved it. (focus group, p. 11)

Everything from her coursework to her sixth grade student teaching experience went well.

**Toward a Master’s.** When we initially met two years ago during the focus group, Suzanne talked about her future plans for teaching and for getting a master’s degree.

(12) …I’m not sure if I’ll stay where I am…I’m not going to be teaching long term. Maybe 20 years…I’ll stay [here], definitely, until my daughter is done there. My son lives [nearby]. I’m kid oriented. I’m not from here…I’m only here because my kids are, and I don’t want to uproot while my daughter is in school…Where I’m at beginning teachers just don’t make a whole lot of money and as I get older and older I really need to make more money. That whole knight and shining armor thing isn’t happening…I see myself definitely getting my master’s degree…I see myself teaching during the day and [at the community college] at night after my daughter is out of the house…I’m happy. I love my job. I love my school. I love the kids I’m working with…I’m happy in the career…(focus group, p. 15)

While she would like the “whole knight in shining armor” thing to happen, she is taking things a bit slower these days. “…If it happens, it happens, and I hope it does…everybody wants somebody who cares about them…” (follow-up interview #1, p. 9).

About nine months later, she talked about getting a degree to help her students.

(13) If I pursue any master’s degree I have to keep in mind that it is something that is needed. I’d love to get my master’s in counseling. I thought about that a lot. My argument is that I don’t really want to be a counselor, but there are so many kids in need in my classroom” (follow-up interview #1, p. 10). She is completely committed to that, but things are on hold for various other reasons. “…But, you know that whole money thing. The roof is taking priority. (follow-up interview #2, p. 12)
Hillary

Hillary is a 51-year-old white female who is professional, mature, and hard working. She is willing to do what needs to be done and to do it right in everything she decides to pursue. She cares about education for herself and others, which brings her to give me some of her demanding time. After graduating from high school, Hillary worked in the food service industry for 25 years before beginning a college degree at the age of 43. I was not surprised when she told me that she was one of the commencement speakers at her community college graduation. After graduating with her associate’s degree, she transferred to a 4-year university to earn her degree in teacher education. That is when I got to know her. She is now teaching middle school life science and physical science. She recently graduated with her Master’s of Science in Elementary Education.

From High School Through Her First 17 Years in the Food Service Industry. From my focus group interview, I knew that Hillary had moved up the ladder of achievement in the food service industry after graduating from high school. She had been this very successful business manager and executive person with several businesses and employees under her and had directed the whole flow of things for many years. This demonstrates her maturity and professionalism.

In the first follow up interview she shared that she fell in love with science when she was in middle school and that she was a “nutrition nut” for a while (follow-up interview #1, p. 1). In fact, when she was in middle school and high school she had various troublesome experiences. She didn’t believe that she had very good teachers, but she separated herself from that (follow-up interview #2, pp. 6 & 7). She had grown up in a family that did not see a point in her going to college and offered no financial support for going that course. “…If I was going to go to college
I was going to do it on my own. I wouldn’t have any support, so I really needed to get a job. I wanted to move out of the house, and I was a typical 18-year-old…” (follow-up interview, p. 1). She saw her situation this way. One thing was, there was a possibility to go to college, but she would have to support herself completely. The other thing was that maybe her parents were not motivated for science. In any case, at this time in her life she needed to get a job.

After working a couple different jobs at the mall for about a year after graduating from high school, Hillary began working for a popular fast food chain. “…I just really kind of fell into [the job]…It was promising as far as potential. When I interviewed with them they talked about being a team. I really like that idea a lot. I had some great people that I worked with, so I quickly just went up the ranks…I just kind of fell into it and found out I was good at it…” (follow-up interview #1, p. 1). She obviously did well because she continued to advance in the company as an area supervisor and trainer, opening many restaurants for them. I thought maybe there had been a time when she believed she would retire from the company. “I thought I would die in the food service industry. I never thought that I would have the opportunity to go back to school…” (follow-up interview #1, p. 3). I could hear a tinge of regret in her words. However, after 17 years of working for the company, she enrolled in the community college and completed 12 credits of general education courses. Also, around that time she married and not wanting to drive an hour each way to work every day, on top of working 12 to 14 hour days, she decided to quit.

**Another Seven Years in Managerial Positions.** After 17 years of being in the food industry, Hillary could have gone into education or whatever, but she fell into another managerial track. I asked her about this when we met for the second follow-up interview. “…Financially, we were not in a position ... where I couldn’t work. We needed both
incomes…If I wanted to go to school; I’m going to school. I just knew that if I was going to school and trying to do a job at the same time that something would suffer…” (follow-up interview #2, p. 7). After seeing an advertisement in the newspaper to open a coffee house at a local university, she applied on the very last day. Even though it was a huge pay cut, she took the job. “…I fell into it again. I just fall into things. Some people would say that I did make choices along the way. I did choose to fill out the application. I just did it at the last minute. I did choose to do all these things, but it was just really easy to do” (follow-up interview #2, p. 8).

Within six months of opening the coffee house, she was hired as the director of operations for a well-known sandwich shop on the same campus. She continued to work at both restaurants for the next two years. “…I think they knew when they hired me for the coffee shop that they had this in the works…They hired me specifically because I had so much experience opening restaurants” (follow-up interview #2, p. 3). She quit the coffee shop after two and a half years, but she continued to work at the sandwich shop for another three years, opening approximately 40 restaurants and the director of operations for 50 by the time she left. “…The only reason I left was because my boss was let go…Time to move on. But after I had moved on that first time after 17 years I wasn’t afraid to move on. I knew that I could do something else” (follow-up interview #1, p. 3).

**Time to Get Serious – But into Nursing or into Teaching?** After 25 years in the food service industry, Hillary got a second longing to pursue a college degree. After her job at the sandwich shop ended in October, she started a late start eight-week course at the community college right away. She then began fulltime in January. By the end of her first semester, she had to decide on a major. I wondered why she did not choose to earn a degree in science, since that had been her interest since middle school.
(1) Actually...I was trying to decide if I was going to go into the medical field or if I was going to go into education...My brother-in-law...said that knowing me I wouldn’t be happy in the medical field; that I would be much happier going into the education field...I value his opinion a lot...When I made that decision everything just started falling into place...I kind of took that as a sign. I don’t know, karma, or whatever. You know, sometimes things just happen. (follow-up interview #1, p. 2)

She started to listen to her brother, and then everything fell into place. This “decision” was confirmed when a few months later she became a lab assistant for a year and a half and her experience in this job and her own feelings were gratified. Her biology instructor told her “...you’d make a really good science teacher...” (follow-up interview #1, p. 3). When we met for the second follow-up interview, I asked her to talk a bit more about the impact of this instructor.

(2) I think she had a lot to do with me going into science. [This is what she is teaching in middle school now.] I really enjoyed her class. I really enjoyed being her lab assistant. I remember sitting in her class and another instructor’s class and just being in awe. I still am in awe when I talk about the cell and DNA and how our body just does things on its own because it’s programmed to do that... (follow-up interview #2, p. 6)

It seems that working in the labs and thinking about how the cell does things brought back the same feelings she had when she fell in love with science in middle school. After taking courses for two years, she earned her associate’s degree and was one of the student speakers at commencement.

**Becoming a Teacher.** After earning her associate’s degree, Hillary transferred to a nearby university. For the next year and a half, she completed her education courses, along with doubling up on science courses so that she could be endorsed to teach middle school science. She became a lab assistant and a chemistry teaching assistant for one of the professors for an entire year at the university. Occasionally, she would substitute teach in the local school district
as a teaching assistant. “…It showed me that I was definitely not cut out for the lower levels. I definitely wanted to have the upper levels…” (follow-up interview #1, p. 4).

Once she completed her coursework, Hillary was set for student teaching in a middle school science classroom, but her original student teaching placement fell through at the last minute. The placement coordinator quickly got her placed in a different building, which happened to be where she had completed some of her internship hours while completing her coursework. “…that in my opinion was not preparation for reality…parents say you are going to college. The expectations are high. As far as having disciplinary issues, there were very few…I had a wonderful experience with my cooperating teacher and learned a lot from her. I guess what is frustrating for me lately is not being prepared for all this differentiation and RtI [Response to Intervention] that is coming across the system…I’m still trying to figure out how to make it through the day without having three different types of lesson plans for the different levels in the classroom” (focus group, p. 8). [The RtI approach provides increasing levels of interventions to address academic and/or behavioral concerns of students.]

Near the end of her student teaching placement, she had asked the principal if he would conduct a practice interview with her because she had an interview setup. During the weekend, she noticed that another school in a different county was hiring a middle school science teacher. When she returned to school on Monday, she told the principal about that position. Before the end of the day, she had an interview set up for Thursday and had the job by Monday. “To me it was like karma. I mean seriously, everything just kept falling into place. I just think it was meant to be” (follow-up interview #2, p. 5).
Middle School Science Teacher: From Getting on Top of the Curriculum to Finding Fulfillment in Relationships with Students.

At the time of this writing, Hillary has been at the job in the county school for 2½ years. In this job, her first 2 years were dominated by efforts to adjust to the requirements of the curriculum, but after that, it seemed she had found her true home in teaching science.

In the first follow-up interview, I asked her if there was a link between her being so successful with the ins and outs of the food industry on the one hand and at the same time having a knack for science, since science has this close connection with food.

(3) I don’t know. Maybe they are separate. I don’t know…I just fell in love with science when I was in middle school. When I was a freshman in high school I actually was a tutor for middle school students in science. I had this conversation with my students the other day. I don’t know if there is a connection there or not. I think the area of science that I’m in has a huge connection with my food service industry. My focus is on life science. I was a huge nutrition nut for a while, and I think that might have something to do with the area that I like to spend most of my time. I don’t know that it has a whole lot to do with science, but there might be a connection there. (follow-up interview, p. 1)

Reading the excerpt, one can hear two voices. On the one hand, there was a big connection between her love of science in middle school and high school and her going into the food service industry, but at the same time, she wondered about what she is doing now in her middle school classes. Is she really doing science? If she was not fully happy in her middle school teaching, she might be leaving teaching! I decided to have another follow-up interview because I wondered whether there was an issue between real science [for her in awe of the cell, excerpt 2] and what she is teaching now. It turns out in the first semester of her fourth year; there was no issue like this. Now “everything was science.”

(4) …I tell my students that everything is science. I tell my students science is math; math is science. Everything is science. So in reality when you tell me that you don’t like science, I would disagree because everything is science.
You know, they wouldn’t have their IPods. They wouldn’t have their phone. They wouldn’t have their music. They wouldn’t have anything without science… I don’t think I thought about that back then, but everything is science… [R asked for clarification.] …they are all interwoven, and you can’t have one without the other. (follow-up interview #2, p. 6)

The quote shows an evolution of her perspective on science when she is talking with her class. The quote indicated to me that she was now at peace and had made the right decision. Later in the follow-up interview, I asked her when she knew that she had made the right decision to go into teaching.

(5) I don’t know, last week [laughing]. I don’t know, the first of this year [first semester of her fourth year] when I started enjoying my students. I don’t think that I ever really realized that I was doing the right thing. I had moments that I’d say, “Oh yea, this is cool.” “Did I really do the right thing?” I’d questioned myself a lot during this even though I love the kids. [She tells the story of a parent trying to bully her.] …I went away wondering why are there teachers teaching. Why? But then I have these wonderful kids that I enjoy and you actually have relationships. I go, “Ok, I can ignore that parent.” But if I had a lot of those parents…I have one a year. I can deal with that. I think just this year I really felt like I’ve done the right thing. The first few years I was trying to figure out how I wanted to do things in my classroom and realizing that I could let them see my personality and that was ok. I didn’t really need to be a bitch all of the time. I could smile at them, and I could actually have fun with them, but yet at the same time I have my expectations. So, this year has been a really good year for me even though I have a challenging group of students. Towards the end of last year I had withdrawal symptoms when I wasn’t with my students. I don’t think that I had really realized I had done the right thing until just recently, quite honestly. Until you get into it, you think you are doing the right thing, not really sure, you know. You go through the motions. You’re doing it all. Your lesson plans are good, but until you have that connection with what you are truly doing. (follow-up interview #2, p. 9 & 10)

Maybe she was in survival mode the first two years. Now she knows her curriculum. But, as the excerpt goes on she describes growing awareness that the important part and what is really fulfilling is not to teach the curriculum, although still has her “expectations.” What really makes her now sure she did the right thing going into education is that now she has genuine relationship with her students. It seems that some of her new fulfillment is foreshadowed already in her first
follow-up interview. “…It is important that we have girls in the science field because there has just been a recent study saying that even though in the past years there has been a growth with women in the field; there has recently been a dip with them going into that field. So, I like to challenge to get my girls into science…Of course, I want all kids to love science…” (follow-up interview #1, p. 5). Her excitement is contagious, and she is motivating many students to want to learn science. Relationship, in general, has now become the main thing.

**Future Prospects.** Last year, during the first follow-up interview, Hillary told me that she had a new principal. After visiting her classroom, he gave her some very positive comments. “…You know, I wish I had a science class like that when I was that a…” (follow-up interview #1, p. 5).

I asked her if she was using anything from her 25 years of experience in the food service industry in her science classes.

(6) There are things from business that I use every single day in my classroom. Setting up, organizing, and planning…I live by my calendar, and I am a planner…I share that with my students as well. I would say that they learn from some of the things that I did…I share with them my life skills or my life experiences. You know, you can go back to school when you are 43, but it’s a lot harder. The synapses just don’t fire as well as they used to. So, then we have this conversation about brain chemistry and how that works” (follow-up interview #1, p. 5).

This is the reason she has an interesting class, because she uses things from her 25 years in the food service industry. She also talks about math. “…Everything is science…Science is math, math is science…” (excerpt 4). This year she will find out if she gets tenure. “…My boss already told me that it would be silly of him not to…recommend me…” (follow-up interview #2, p. 10). It may be serendipity, but perhaps I should mention that her principal used to work as a custodian for the same fast food restaurant that she worked at for 17 years, but they did not work at the same restaurant location. She remembers when he married someone who worked under
her at her restaurant location and who helped her open many restaurants. He, too, made the decision to go back to school and earn his teaching certificate from the same university that she graduated. He then furthered his education and earned his master’s degree in administration after teaching history at the middle school building where she now teaches. She uses this as a teaching point for her students today. “…Be careful about how you talk to people and how you treat people because you don’t know what that connection is” (follow-up interview #2, p. 10).

When we met for the first follow-up interview, Hillary told me that was working on her master’s degree. “…It would make me a better teacher…” (follow-up interview #1, p. 6). Now that she has graduated, I asked her when we met again if she planned to take more courses, even possibly earning her doctorates. “…Right now I just promised my husband I would take some time off so that I would focus on my work, working on my curriculum and stuff. Maybe in a year or so after I’ve had some down time…I hope to work part time, keep my day job, and work part time, say at [the community college] as an instructor, like a night instructor…honestly, a Ph.D. would not do anything for me as far as career wise. It would give me more hours pay wise, but professionally unless I am planning on going into a university setting it isn’t going to do anything for me” (follow-up interview #2, p.1).

She plans to take a few more science courses, though. “…At this time my…hope is to take some more science classes…Teaching science, I feel like I need to keep up, and I don’t think I’m keeping up with what is going on in the science field without taking more classes…” (follow-up interview #2, p. 1). Taking more science courses will make her a more rounded teacher.

I confirmed with her that she wanted to stay in teaching. “Yes. I love academia. I love learning…” (follow-up interview #2, p. 9). She is in love with science and with pure knowledge.
Besides, she had already told me when we met earlier how she felt about her career. “...I think after I finish my masters I’m going to spend the next few years working on my relationship with my husband, as well as my relationship with my kids, [her students], and be a better teacher. That’s really what I want to do...even though I have things set up from last year...I find something new. I’m always looking for something new to do with my kids to keep it exciting...[R confirmed that she stays in teaching for several reasons.]...You know, I am kind of like all it in right now. It’s not an option not to be a teacher for me. I don’t think about not being a teacher. It’s just kind of what I do now. I don’t know. I’ve never thought about doing something else...” (follow-up interview, p. 8).

Paul

One’s first impression of Paul, in his late 30s, is that he is very outgoing, mature, and sure of himself. One believes he really understands his part in this study and knows what he has to say is valuable. Paying close attention to my questions, he answers confidently and gets right to the point. Seeing the serious look on his face, one believes that he is thinking and that he cares. He first received an English literature degree, but, after earning that degree, he worked on the family farm, coached basketball, and substitute taught for nine years instead of seeking a career that required this degree. Four years ago he started education courses and is now teaching seventh and eighth grade language arts.

Paul’s wife, Mary, was also in the same cohort. At that time, they had one child and were expecting their second child by the end of their two years of coursework. I remember the night they announced in class that they were expecting another baby. The cohort cheered with enthusiasm. Mary was able to finish the coursework, but had to put student teaching on hold. She eventually completed her student teaching and has now finished her first year of teaching.
**Fulfillment of Farming.** From the focus group interview, I knew that farming played a big role in Paul’s life. He grew up on the farm, and it is part of him. Yet here he was, nine years after his degree in English literature teaching 7th and 8th grade language arts. Therefore, I asked him:

(1) R: What were your farm experiences growing up?

P: You know I just grew up on the farm. The house was 15 feet away from the hog barn, which was 20 feet away from the mule barn. We rode our bikes around the hog house. We jumped the rock pile, which was intended to build something, a grain bin. Then we watched tractors pull in the driveway and dump corn. We watched dad or my uncle or my grandpa harvest corn. It was just always there. It was always ever present. When did I know that I wanted to be a farmer? The first time I drove a tractor I was five. I drove a combine when I was seven. Of course, there was somebody around. I was always part of it. I sat on my dad’s lap. I drove a tractor home. We had a hog farm about ten miles down the road. I used to sit on the tractor and pull it forward when we had to unload feed. He would move the auger back and forth. He’d tell me when to stop. It was always a part of my life.

R: Your dad has always farmed?

P: Always farmed since he got out of college in 1960 something.

R: Oh, ok. So is he pretty confident in farming and successful?

P: It is hard to define success in farming. I’m sure he feels he might not have as much ground as somebody else. He provided for the family. A nice house for my mom and us growing up. He had free time going to the baseball games, softball games, and soccer games. He traveled to watch us play basketball. Is he successful? I’m sure he wishes he had all of his debts paid off, but it seems like farming is never ending. It’s always you need a tractor here. Ground comes up for sale there. But I would say if he is going to do something for 45 years of his life, then he is very happy. I would say that he is very successful at it. And he is leaving a lasting legacy for me, also. (follow-up interview #2, p. 1)

“…I just grew up on the farm…” is a prelude to all kinds of images. “…The house was 15 feet away from the hog barn that was 20 feet away from the mule barn. We rode our bikes…we jumped the rock pile…we watched the tractors pull in and dump corn. We watched dad or my
uncle or my grandpa harvest corn…” The family seems close, working together when they need to. These were happy times in Paul’s life. “…It was just always there. It was always ever present…” Farming has shaped his life and his personality. Paul wants to continue the family tradition today.

In fact, Paul is so caught up in this he asks another question. “…When did I know that I wanted to be a farmer?…” He wants to go on with his memories. “…I drove a tractor when I was five. I drove a combine when I was seven…” “…I was always part of it. I sat on my dad’s lap. I drove a tractor home…” Paul was content around the farm and excited to be on the land. All of it, from the dumping of corn to learning how to drive a tractor, is a part of his life and heritage.

Next, Paul takes my simple question, “So is he [Paul’s dad] pretty confident in farming and successful?” to a new level and paints a picture. He provides pro’s and con’s as he thinks about how farming gives him fulfillment. “…He provided for the family. A nice house for my mom and us growing up…,” tells me that Paul believes the farm sustained his family. “…He had free time going to the baseball games, softball games, soccer games…” All of the games that his dad was able to attend obviously make for an ideal situation to Paul. Rhetorically, Paul asks, “Is he successful?” shows me he is not finished with his thoughts. He wants me to hear more before giving me the final answer. “…I’m sure he wishes he had all of his debts paid off, but it seems like farming is never ending…” This is something I learn that one can expect in farming. It is a challenge and farmers accept what it takes to keep on farming. They care about their ground and everything else that is connected to that lifestyle. Nonetheless, Paul believes his dad has lived an ideal life and accepts it as he responds to my original question. “…I would say that he is very successful at it. And he is leaving a lasting legacy for me.” All in all, Paul is
referring not only to the property that his father will leave him someday, but to the nonmaterial legacy – one that is far more important to Paul. It is one that comprises a lifetime of family relationships, accomplishments, and values. This is where he can get fulfillment.

Paul has two sisters, but neither has an interest in farming nor lives close by, so he is the only one to continue the farm and enjoy the life it brings.

(2) R: Has your dad always expected you to take over the farm someday?

P: I don’t think it was expected, but wanted, dreamed.

R: Yeah.

P: If I wanted to be an airline pilot he would have supported me. But as any young dad does, he hopes that his son follows in his footsteps.

R: So, did you grow up thinking that you might take over the farm?

P: No, I grew up thinking that I was going to take over the farm. But I went to college. I went to college just to play basketball and do other things that go with college. Whether I got a degree or not, I always had the farm to fall back on. But I went to college and spent thousands of dollars on student loans. I didn’t even have a major declared yet. I had to declare something to get out. The farm was always what I was going back to.

R: And you liked it?

P: Yes. Absolutely, I liked it. Now I know better, but I thought there was room for me in that big corporation with my uncles and my grandpa. Really when you scale it back…there wouldn’t be enough…I’d have to come up with my own ground or find a way to get more ground or rent more ground. That’s tough for a 19- or 20-year-old kid to do. (follow-up interview #2, p. 3)

I was slightly surprised when Paul told me, “I don’t think it was expected, but wanted, dreamed,” when I asked him if his dad expected him to take over the farm. This lets me know that would be the ultimate success for his dad to pass it on to him. The farmland is multigenerational, and the family is beginning to have a long history of farmers. At any rate, I
find out what kind of dad Paul’s father is when he continues, “…If I wanted to be an airline pilot he would have supported me…” I admire their relationship.

Paul corrects me when I ask, “So, did you grow up thinking that you might take over the farm?” His reply, “No, I grew up thinking that I was going to take over the farm” tells me he thought deep inside that he was going to take it over. He had assumed that belief years ago. This is confirmed when he said twice, “…I always had the farm to fall back on…The farm was always what I was going back to.” It seems that farming is going to remain a part of his life, and the two can’t be separated.

**Seeds But No Larger Inspiration In College.** In reading the transcripts, I asked myself, how is it that this man who is so deeply into farming wants to teach. His fulfillment comes from farming, and his ideal is his dad who is a farmer. My research is about why these participants come back to get an education degree. What is going on with Paul? Why did he go back to school to become a teacher? In fact, he is now in his second year of teaching. He is very confident that he is going to be teaching for a while until he takes over the farm. What is going on? This made me ask a natural question, what did he do in college? Did he get the idea of teaching in college? Most farmers do not change their careers to teaching or to becoming middle school English language arts teachers.

The summer after high school graduation, before he entered college, Paul was nominated to an all-star basketball team that traveled to exciting places like Spain. This was a big honor for him. He really had not thought about college until he returned home from traveling with the basketball team.

(3) …I really had no ambition to go to college. I had this opportunity to play on this all-star team and we went to Spain and back and I thought, you know, I wouldn’t mind playing basketball in college if I could get a scholarship. Then I started calling around here and found a college down the road, and I went
there. I had no idea what I was going to do when I got there. (follow-up interview #2, p. 3-4)

He eventually took the initiative and called colleges on his own. He later told me that when he returned home from Spain a couple of other coaches were interested in him, but he wanted to be close to home.

(4) ...a couple of coaches kind of wanted me, but they were from different states, and I wanted to stay close to home. Then I talked with some coaches around here and heard their deals. Then I talked with my college and they said why don’t you give us a try here. They asked me if I knew what I was going to major in. I told them not really. They said, “Well, you’ll figure it out.” (follow-up interview #2, p. 5)

Paul found a school and began rather quickly that fall. He explains it best when he says, “…It just happened” (follow-up interview #2, p. 5). After all, that was what his parents expected of him, and he had quickly made it happen, even if it was just so he could play basketball. A major would certainly be decided upon later.

One might think that if Paul were going to go to college he would be interested in a degree in agriculture. I asked him if he had considered that.

(5) No, not really. I wanted to stay close to home. I always wanted to be centered around the farm. The farm was, you know, my headquarters. When you do the 30 mile radius you aren’t talking many schools. There weren’t many options out there. I didn’t want to go a long ways away. You know I saw the neighbor kids that went off to ag school, and they just pledged into some fraternity. They aren’t any better farmers. (follow-up interview #2, p. 4)

“I always wanted to be centered around the farm” and it was “my headquarters” confirms the whole image in the first section about him in farming. The farm was the center of his life and the world in which he was living. Therefore, he didn’t look for colleges beyond 30 miles, and none of the colleges within 30 miles had an ag school. Anyway, to him there is nothing great about ag school. He saw some of his friends go to ag school, and it didn’t do anything for them. The
passage illustrates what kind of a person he is. He is independent and down-to-earth. These career judgments show his personality and his clarity of being a farmer.

The question still remains as to why Paul came back to get a teaching certificate and is now a middle school teacher. From the focus group, I knew that he had taken an education course during his first year of college. I thought maybe this course might have been an inspiration. Maybe he had thought about education for a short period of time. I asked him if he was thinking about going into sports or exercise science.

(6) Well, I didn’t want to be a PE teacher. I wouldn’t mind being a basketball coach. That wouldn’t be too bad. But I thought if I want to be a coach, but I don’t want to do PE, but I need to be looking in the education field. I thought 5th grade would be a perfect fit for me. I don’t know why, but I thought 5th grade. No snotty noses or tying shoes. I might have even declared Elementary Ed as a freshman. I don’t know if I did or not. I got stuck in this observation class, and they sent me to an inner city school. I thought this is just not for me…I’m thinking why am I here. This isn’t where I want to be at. Getting up at 7:00 in the morning and hanging out with 5th graders all day. This isn’t what I want to do. (follow-up interview #2, p. 5)

These comments raised more questions, so in the next follow-up interview I asked Paul if he had thought about becoming a teacher when he made the decision to take this course.

(7) …There weren’t a whole lot of opportunities for me there. I mean, my other passion besides basketball was agriculture. They didn’t have any agriculture classes there. I thought well maybe I could be a basketball coach, but you can’t do that unless you are a teacher. I’m not going to lie to you. I went to college to play basketball. So I just tried everything like a smorgasbord. I’ll take a computer science class. I took an education class. I really hadn’t declared a major at all. I just took the education class. If I went I could be a basketball coach. I was young when I went to college. I mean, I wasn’t even eighteen yet. I just wasn’t mature. In fact, up until I got accepted the first week of August I was just going to go to a community college and mess around. (follow-up interview #3, pp. 1 & 2)

Paul took this course early, in his freshman year, as he was trying to decide what he was going to major in. It gave him the opportunity to practice teaching in a real 5th-grade classroom. But, he “got stuck” (see 6) in the class in an inner city school, and he knew it wasn’t for him. It was
foreign context to him. This passage gave me an image of a mature person looking back.

“…I’m not going to lie to you. I went to college to play basketball…I just wasn’t mature…”

(see 7). There was no bitterness; he made no excuses. He wasn’t trying to make himself or anything look different from what it was.

Paul realized that teaching wasn’t for him.

(8) …You know I can’t be an educator if I’m hung over. I mean, I’m not a role model. I wondered what am I doing here. These sixth graders are looking up to me like I’m the greatest guy ever, and I can’t live up to that expectation right now. (follow-up interview #2, p. 4)

He knew that he woke up drunk in the morning and that he had no business being in front of these kids being a model. Even though he thought education wasn’t for him, he still wasn’t able to set goals for his future as far as a major was concerned. He continued to take more general education courses. “…my math, language arts, and my sciences…The college didn’t have a tremendous amount of options to pick from…” (follow-up interview #2, p. 4). Yet, isn’t college all about finding a major? He did not have any career ambitions other than farming. He was there to play basketball. He had not given any thought to an ideal career path for himself.

The education course that he took as a freshman was not an immediate factor. He majored English and is now an English teacher, so maybe the English courses he took in college inspired him. Why did he major in English literature? The explanation comes up unexpectedly by accident on the second follow-up interview.

(9) …Remember, I’m on a five-year plan here. I had already declared that I was going to be a literature major…this is where I declared a major [in his third year]. “Paul, you need to declare a major or transfer. What do you want to do?” So I looked at my transcript. No, not chemistry. No not biology. What do I have the most Bs and As in? Writing. Oh, ok. I’ll get a literature degree. I’ve got to get out of school sometime! So I chose what was available, and it was a literature degree.
R: Did you tell me that you had a friend who was a literature major? (follow-up interview #1, p. 4) Didn’t she talk with you about going into it?

P: Yeah. We talked about it, and I said, “I can do that.” (follow-up interview #2, pp. 5-6)

He had to get out of school sometime. So he looked around at what was available and that was a literature degree. In the next interview, the details of the decision came out. I asked him about the about the five year plan.

(10) …It was never my plan nor was it a plan for the college. If you just major in Bud light and other things besides basketball. I hadn’t declared a major yet. One day I decided to declare a major. My junior year. [R asked a couple of clarification questions.] …I was just an aimless drifter. People would say what are you going to do with an American literature degree. Well, I am just going to go farm. I mean why get a literature degree. Seriously. But it wasn’t until the middle of my third year that I said I’ve got to get out of here. I’m getting kind of old. I’m still thinking what am I going to be when I grow up. There are some kids who get a sports manager degree, but there are no jobs out there for them. I mean education was kind of in the back of my mind. I remember talking with my literature professor. I said, “You know I am going to have all of these literature classes. Maybe I should go think about becoming a secondary major. Maybe I should look at the education classes.” But at that time I was just wanting to get the heck out of college. (follow-up interview #3, p. 2)

At this point, I understood how Paul decided on a degree, even though it wasn’t in education. “I am just going to go to the farm” (see 9) told me he still had every intention of going back to the farm when he finished college. At least by then, he knew which major he was working toward so he could focus on finishing his degree.

Still, I had thought him choosing English as a major would explain his current state of teaching English in middle school. Yet, it appears he chose English as a fluke, by elimination. There was no immediate direct connection. What was he good at? Well, did his college experience have nothing to do with his later going into education? Actually, it did. In his fourth year he took a course in coaching and as a direct result from that he started coaching basketball
in his old high school for the next nine years. This was very unexpected. How did this come about?

(11) …I found a college basketball coach [in the faculty of his college]. Oh, he’s teaching a coaching class. I need three hours, and that will help my GPA… One of the final assignments is to scout a game. I could’ve scouted the girls’ college team, but I didn’t want to. I wanted to stay close to home, so I called my high school basketball coach and told him I wanted to scout a game … watched him fill out this form that you fill out. I watched them play. I did a very good job of scouting. Then I watched him again. I ended up watching him six times. Then I took this course back to my coach, and he asked if I was interesting in coaching. I said, “I have one more year of college left. (follow-up interview #2, p. 6)

His finding the coaching course and being able to scout in his old high school was another fluke. However, this opportunity played an important role in subsequent years. He knew he would have the time to coach in his old high school now that his four years of playing for his college were ending, and he still had year five left. This connection would open up a new door to education that would last for the next nine years. He continues:

(12) …So I said, “Yeah, if the right opportunity came up I’d think about coaching, I guess. I could do something like that.” And he didn’t say anymore to me. Then it was about September, I was back in school, and he called me and said, “Hey, would you like to be a freshman coach?” [in his fifth year of college] I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Well, you have to apply and do this whole resume stuff and get a shirt and tie and interview.” I interviewed. It was me and this other guy. The other guy was way more qualified, and he should’ve had the job. I guess he backed out or didn’t want it, so I was the freshman coach.

R: How long were you a freshman coach?

P: I did the freshman coach for one year, and then I did the Junior Varsity freshman for two years and then the varsity for six more years after that [all at his old high school]. (follow-up interview #2, p. 6)

In his fifth year of college, he began a coaching career in his old high school. He continued to coach for the next nine years with the season lasting from November through
March. He had told me, “…I was liking it. It was a good gig…” (follow-up interview #1, p. 1). It worked out well with his farming schedule, too.

**A Teacher at Heart After All.** Paul coached in his old high school for eight years after college. However, I was still trying to figure out why he went back to college to get certification to become a teacher. In the first follow-up interview, I asked him to talk about when he first had that vision of being a teacher. He talked about the coaching course and how he coached in his old high school, which then got him interacting more with the school district. So maybe that is where it started. The decision to get teacher certification has to be looked at from a larger perspective. There were many other factors. As usual with Paul, everything came about ‘naturally.’

After interacting more with the school district, the students, and the principal, because of his coaching position, Paul thought about applying to be a substitute teacher at the school [the junior high school]. After all, it was only eight miles from his house, and he often stopped in and visited since he was frequently in town doing business, so he was very familiar with the school before he became a permanent substitute teacher. This also would be an opportunity for him to make some extra money. He talked with the principal about his idea.

(13) …Then I said to the principal, “You know I should get in here and sub a little bit. It is a lot better being in the school in the winter time than hanging out on the farm when you’re freezing…” I became a sub and subbed once or twice a week. I wasn’t getting very many jobs, so I went to the principal one day and said, “You ever going to call me for some steady job.” He said, “I have a 7th and 8th grade teacher who teaches literature and grammar here in the junior high who is going on maturity leave. I had a lady, but she backed out.” He said, “Do you want to do it?” I said, “For how long?” He said, “How long do you want it to be for?” I said, “I can go until spring, planting season.” He said, “Perfect.” So I started November 1 and ended in April. So they threw me in the classroom. The teacher had some lesson plans for the first week and had some broad plans of some topics she wanted covered the second week. They gave me a crash course of how to put the grades into the computer and there you go. (follow-up interview #1, p. 1)
His confident and bold personality got him the position as a permanent substitute teacher for the rest of that year. In fact, the job was one that gave him something to do during the winter months when he was not farming. Of course, farming was more important. (If he had to farm, he would not sub for the day. The woman who called for subs was a farm wife, so she knew not to call him on certain days.) Nevertheless, he felt comfortable around these kids, and he had an English literature degree. With only broad plans to follow, he entered the classroom willing to figure it all out. I asked him how the experience went. After that, he got into talking about several factors that were at work. There was the financial aspect—he earned only $5,000 a year coaching and could not make it otherwise—his dad needed his help on the farm, and he was becoming more mature. He then talked about getting into the university:

(14) P: It went very well. That was my first teaching, and it wasn’t that bad. Most years I would farm from, you know, September until the middle of November. Then I could coach basketball and sub all of November, December, January, February, March, towards the later part of March when the basketball season ends. My subbing would pretty much come to an end. I would get the corn planted. The beans planted. I could go back and do some subbing in May. [R asked a couple of clarification questions.] …Financially we weren’t making it very well. I was making all my decisions in life on a matter of a $5,000 basketball coaching job, which was crazy. I was afraid my dad wouldn’t be able to make it without me, also. We sort of depended on each other…He was my left hand, and I was his right hand, and we were right there together…I was worried about that. There were other jobs outside of agriculture that I thought about doing. Being a cigarette salesman was one of them…but I turned it down. My wife was in the business field, and they weren’t really accepting of mothering. You know, she wanted to be home with her daughter, and I couldn’t blame her. But she had all the insurance. She had all the benefits. That’s an important deal.

R (asked if that’s what he thought he would do now, farm, sub, and coach.)

P: I was naïve…I thought that once I was out there people would just say hey, I want you to farm my ground…Then I thought my uncle was going to retire…I just kept holding on and holding on to the point that I realized I wasted five years. Student loans were backing up, and it was really getting tough…But I liked coaching, and I like subbing…I could see myself making
the transformation that I could go back to school. And if I went back the next time it was going to be for all of the right reasons. I would be a better student than I was before. (follow-up interview # 2, p. 7)

He had the combination of two pressures – his wife wanting to stay home with their daughter (but could not because she had the insurance) and waiting for his uncle to retire from farming. The pressure of these two factors made it possible for him to see himself making the transformation of going back to school and becoming a full-time teacher. That would still enable him to work on the farm when he needed to. At that time, right before he made the decision to go back to school, he thought that now when he went back it would be for the right reasons. He would become a teacher for the right reasons, and he would not leave. All three of these positions (farming, coaching, and subbing) in his life had become passions, so to speak.

I asked Paul if he thought about going into literature. He brushed it off. He never thought of that. He was thinking about many other jobs for permanent employment, like becoming a cigarette salesperson. Then when it came time to decide to go back to the university to get an education degree it clicked. He felt it was the right thing.

(15) P: When I went into education there was something that clicked. I can do this, and I’m not going to feel guilty. I like these kids…I like this.

R: You were around the kids during subbing, so did you decide to teach then?

P: Absolutely. I started looking around at universities. Some had a teacher’s degree program, but it’s Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 8 to 9. Your whole day is shot. You can’t work. You can’t do anything. My wife was looking to get out of her job. Somehow the university sent her something, and we looked at it. She said she was going to go see these people on Tuesday, and I really want you to go. I said, “Well, I’ll take a look at it.” I thought this is probably what we should do. (follow-up interview #2, p. 8)

In a follow-up interview, we spoke again about how he decided to go into teaching. He repeated the same things that he told me in 14 and 15 and then he added these comments.
The thing that education does allow is for me to have my summers…I decided to go for my teaching certificate that day, on the way to the university. My wife said, “You should look at this.” I got in there, and I don’t know if it was just chance or whatever, but they didn’t even look at my transcripts. They didn’t see that my GPA wasn’t as high as it was supposed to be. They said, “Oh yeah, we’ll take you.” They took my money right then and there. We signed up, and I said, “I can do this.” (follow-up interview #3, p. 1)

Paul made some realizations. If he went into teaching he will have his summers, and he can farm. In addition, it would be financially better for him to get a permanent teaching position than to continue to substitute teach; yet, this is only part of it. His wife could get her teaching certificate and be home more with their kids. The school did not notice he had a deficiency; that became apparent later and was addressed.

While Paul took the courses one night a week for the next year and a half, along with his wife, he continued to farm, sub, and coach. When it came time to student teach he had to quit his subbing and coaching jobs to devote time to teaching. He student taught in a seventh grade language arts room, and it went well for him. Besides, he was already familiar with this age group from the permanent substitute teaching position he had for five months. He knew how to set up lesson plans, and he knew how the day went in school. He told me, “…I felt like I did a pretty good job. I liked my teaching experience. The lady I had evidently saw a genius right here or something because she turned it over to me the third day…” (focus group, p. 2). His comments show his confidence.

A New Meaning in Life. How do things look for Paul today? After becoming certified to teach, he got a position teaching 7th and 8th grade language arts, which is what he does now. In fact, with his own self-motivation, he has decided to earn a master’s degree. In one follow-up interview he mentioned,
I am thinking about getting my masters. I don’t want to start a master’s program until I am tenured. I look at the pay schedule and see how much more I can make. But then I don’t know if I will ever get it done before I retire.” (follow-up interview #1, p. 7)

However, by the next follow-up interview he had made some definite plans about the degree. He told me, “I start my masters in January. I want to get that masters. I want to make myself, I don’t know the word, unriffable, if that’s a word…I want to be a reading specialist, especially for those junior high kids…” (follow-up interview #2, p. 9). The big thing for him is that he means something to the kids.

Taking over the farm is still in the same place is has always been. Paul shared, “My dad is 62 years old, and there will come a time when I will take over his farm land. I still help him out…” (follow-up interview #1, p. 7). He still sees himself on the farm someday. It brings him self-fulfillment.

When I asked Paul in a follow-up interview if he still thought about coaching he shared, “You know, the funny thing is, that is almost the furthest thing from my mind right now…” (follow-up interview #2, p. 8). Maybe coaching was not as big of an importance to Paul as he had originally thought. At least it isn’t now. The overall impression of him shows me he has an inner clarity and honesty. He has done soul searching to get where he is today. For now he will stay in teaching, unless the farm pulls him back.

**Gwen**

Gwen, in her early 40s, was perhaps the most outspoken about her faith of all the participants. She also has an infectious laugh, a lot of energy, and an inviting personality that makes you want to spend time with her. She is teaching 8th grade math. She has an elementary education degree and a finance degree and worked at a bank as an investment advisor for 16 years.
As one of her elementary education instructors, I clearly remember the night when another student mentioned in class that if his employer knew that he was taking courses towards another career he would be in trouble. That was the biggest relief for her when she realized that she was not the only one hiding her real dream of becoming a teacher from a current employer. She burst into almost a cheer to be able to confide in a cohort that she knew she could trust. I had to take time to let the students engage in some brief conversation of this discovery that emerged out of nowhere. It was rather obvious that she had some of her heavy burden lifted that night. Four years later this cohort has continued to keep in close contact with each other by getting together occasionally.

As Gwen shares her personal journey, you hear how she went from thinking about teaching many years ago as a high school student, but was persuaded not to go in that direction. Then she talks about the unhappy years as an investment advisor followed by a leap of faith to begin education courses. She goes on to tell of a big experience where she believed that the Lord confirmed her plan. Telling this story still moves her to tears today.

**Introduces Herself as a Teacher.** Gwen grew up knowing that she would go to college, but her path to teaching has been very round-about. In fact, this is how she introduced herself to the focus group.

(1) R: What are currently doing in education?

G: This is my second year at [my school]. I’m an 8th grade math teacher. I came from a different path because I was a finance major at [a university]. I worked at a bank. I was a loan officer. I had the role of vice president, which means nothing really. I was an investment advisor, but I really wasn’t happy. I was there 16 years, and it took me a long time to realize that I wasn’t happy. It took a lot of courage for me to get out of that and to realize that I had the choice. I always wanted to teach when I was in high school. I asked my teachers about it, and they said don’t go into teaching, so I really thought it must be a terrible profession, so I never went into it. That’s how I got here. I
thought I’m going to do it because I would enjoy it, and I was right. I love it.
(focus group, p. 1)

Immediately, after the three participants took their turns introducing themselves, they
reflected on what they were doing before they began teaching. She shared:

(2) My mom and dad always pushed to go to college, so I knew that I would go to
college. So that wasn’t an issue at the time. Right after college, I went right
to work. I had worked since I was 16. I tell you this, growing up I was
always impressed upon to get the job that paid the most. That was the goal. I
guess that is why I never went into teaching because I thought it must not be a
good job because it doesn’t pay the most, and not that banking does, but I was
geoographically trapped. I wanted to stay around by my family, so it was a
decent job. It took me a long time to realize that’s not important. Money is
not important at all. Again, I’m geographically trapped so what am I going to
do. I could go into nursing. Yuck. I love the atmosphere at the school. I love
the hope at the school. I love the opportunity to talk with those kids that
nobody else wants. I love that. I love those kids. I love the kids that nobody
else does. focus group, p. 3)

At the end of (2) Gwen could not really remember why she went into finance. She is
trying to reconstruct as she looks for reasons. This is evident as she repeats herself in the follow-
up interview, “…I don’t know why I picked business. I wanted to live in the cornfields…”
(follow-up interview, p. 4). In the follow-up interview she said, “…I was excited about being in
the business school when I went to college. I chose it because I thought it sounded exciting and
paid well. No “real” reason besides lack of any other idea. That sounds terrible…” (follow-up
interview, p. 1). She is jumping around trying to figure out why she wasn’t focused when she
began working on her business degree.

At the end of (2), Suzanne, who also teaches middle school, chimes in by saying,
“Everybody is afraid of middle school kids, adults are. They’re just afraid to have a conversation
with them, and they’re intimidated by them. It’s funny because I think they’re amazing” (focus
group, p. 3). This made Gwen continue:
Sally’s comment about her middle school kids and her own memories make Gwen think of the pool hall. It is exciting how they build on each other’s ideas! The way she talks about the pool hall kids, “…I loved those kids. I could see such redeeming qualities…” (focus group, p. 3) and then immediately starts talking about the bank, “…If the bank would have known that I was taking classes I think I would have been fired…” (focus group, p. 3), naturally made me assume that the pool hall was the thing that triggered her wanting to be a teacher. She had worked for 16 years at the bank, and four years ago she embarked on the teaching process to get certified of which she is now in her second year of teaching. I assumed that the pool hall started the process of her trying to get certification four years ago. Only when she student taught did she quit the bank. However, in a follow-up interview a few weeks later, it turns out that actually the pool hall didn’t happen only a few years ago, but the pool hall period was during the first six years of working at the bank. Sally’s comment had jogged Gwen’s memory. In the follow-up interview, Gwen tells how it occurred at the beginning of her banking career, “…It was at the beginning. We were married in 1990, but he had the pool hall before we were married, and I hung out there all of the time…” (follow-up interview, p. 6). It occurred a long time before she actually decided to change into education. She only brought up the pool hall from the distant past because it was immediately related to her current immersion in the change. It is clear today that she was
affected by the kids in the pool hall. At the time, she did not realize it because she was happy at
the bank for the first several years. I asked her if she thought about teaching during the six years
that she was around the kids at the pool hall. “No. It was at the beginning of the bank, and I
liked what I was doing [at the bank]…” (follow-up interview, p. 6). She thought she had a
promising life there.

**At the Bank.** Even while working at the bank, Gwen continued to have occasional
thoughts of what it would be like to be a teacher. “I can remember going into the school one
time for the bank. I walked into the school and looked around and thought this is so cool. I
loved the atmosphere” (follow-up interview, p. 7). She is full of energy and has her own idea of
what brings fulfillment. At one time, the bank brought fulfillment, but that eventually changed.
Walking into a school brought liveliness to her. Whatever permeated the environment, be it the
sounds, smells, or sights, she experienced a pleasant emotion. I asked her about how she felt
about her work at the bank.

(4) R: Did you think about education any other time during those 16 years?

G: When I started getting bored with what I was doing, and I thought what
else am I going to do that I would like that would be in this area. I am
geographically trapped. I want to be here…I started the bank in 1990, and I
left the bank in 1998 and came back three months later…I had a good job at
the bank, but I was wanting to do something different…(follow-up interview,
p. 7)

At first, the bank asked her to come back, but she wanted to try out the new position. After three
months, the bank called again and made her a new offer, and this time she went back. The bank
promised new training and new responsibilities.

(5) …I left [the new job] and went back to the bank. I had this schooling I had to
go through. Once the schooling and all that was over and I get into the job
and I think, oh, crap, I’m back at the bank…(laughing). (follow-up interview,
p. 7)
She continues talking about how the bank was not for her.

(6) …There was just no place to go at the bank. Not that I want to go anywhere now, but it is just more exciting at the school than the bank. It just wasn’t for me. Sitting behind a desk all day is not for me…(follow-up interview, p. 7)

What really is going on is that she is aware that after so many years she gets bored. In 1998, when she left her banking job, there was no thought of education or the pool hall kids.

(7) …I really just did that on a whim because I would have done anything. I didn’t really care because I was young, and I didn’t have kids. Everybody said if you want to do something this is the time to do it. (follow-up interview, p. 8)

The focus group continued. I asked them to talk about when they really decided that education was for them. Erin told her story when she substitute taught and the classroom teachers kept telling her that she was doing a good job. At the end came the climax: because of No Child Left Behind, she was required to complete 60 credit hours of college coursework to teach. Erin commented,

(8) I made that realization that I loved what I was doing and was making a difference…I didn’t care for the high school, which was fine because I didn’t have that certification, but I loved junior high kids…I also loved working with those younger kids. There wasn’t really anything I could find with any age level that I didn’t enjoy. (focus group, p. 5)

At that moment, I can see Gwen beginning to cry, “I can’t talk for a second. (almost crying)” (focus group, p. 5). Immediately Suzanne picks up, “I’ll jump in…” and she tells her story. After Suzanne is finishes, Gwen has regained her composure enough that I encourage to talk about her story.

**A Sign From God.** Gwen is still suppressing her tears while Suzanne is talking, “…it makes all of these feelings come up that I was feeling at this time [four years ago when she decided to go into education]…” (focus group, p. 5). She apologized and then told her story,
...When all of this was going on and I was at the bank, I would just get sick thinking of doing it for the rest of my life...This was in 2004. I talked with the education office, and I was short one class, even though I had my degree to get into the program, so I just picked it up at a community college. And I prayed about it. I said, “Lord, I don’t even know if this is the right thing to do, but I don’t know what to do. So I’m going to take this class and if it’s what you want me to do I just pray that it works out and that door is going to be open.” I always think about sticking my head through the door and looking around as if I’m supposed to walk through it or not. Anyway, when I took this class I really didn’t tell anybody about what was going on. My husband knew I was taking the course, but he didn’t know that I was looking at this door and thinking about going into education...I needed a literature class, and they had the Bible literature so I took it. A big assignment that was due during this class was to pick a character out of the Bible and do a 500-year world history before that character and a 500-year world history after that character. So I picked David...Anyway, a week before that was due, my daughter got sick and had to go to the hospital and had to have some surgery. At the time, I could care less about that class. And, “Lord, I appreciate you giving me the opportunity.” But I could see the door close. So I called the professor and said, “I can’t do this assignment. I’m at the hospital with my daughter, and I’m not going to be able to finish.” She was like; no way, just call me when it settles down. So, I could care less about that assignment...I walked in the door [at home] after that week and knowing all this stuff about the class and about staying at the bank, which I didn’t want to do, there’s a book. It said *Time Chart of Biblical History*. I started crying, and I said, “What is that book doing here?” My mother-in-law looked at me, and she thought I was mad. She said, “I just saw it at a rummage sale today, and I thought you’d like it.” ...It’s a pull-open book, and it had David...and I said, “Lord, I’m taking this that you think it is ok that I will be in school, and I’m going to put that book in my classroom [her 8th grade classroom]...
she should walk through or not. She is listening to the Lord, but she used to look to other people for answers. In an email, she clarified to me:

(10) As a general rule, I usually do put too much emphasis on what others think. But I now try to take people’s opinion as a reference point, but then make my own decision. This is hard for me, and I am still working on not worrying too much about what others think. (member checking, p. 1)

Gwen was enrolled in a biblical literature course. It is unusual that she did not tell anyone, except her husband, about it. She carried this around in private. What does this tell me? There is something small and deep within her not to tell her husband. It must have been something very intimate in her, but she talks with God about it. Several weeks later, I asked her in an email to explain. She told me, “Nobody asked me, if they were wondering why I took the course. I think I was embarrassed about not being happy at the bank. My mom worked at her job for 33 years, and my dad worked at (his job) for 30 years. Perhaps, I was afraid that they would think I somehow failed” (member checking, p. 1).

Gwen already knows that she has other interests. She mentioned one of them during the focus group. “I think I’ll stay in teaching until I write a children’s book. This is my progress, after I retire, in 20 years or so, I’m 41, and then I’ll go onto my next career of writing children’s books (laughing, but serious)” (focus group, p. 15). In the follow-up interview, she shared even more interests, “I have other interests when I retire from teaching. I have other things I can do” (follow-up interview, p. 1). She wants to write children’s book, be an evangelist, and write songs. These are all her future interests. In fact, she has already written a children’s book in her mind. Gwen knows that she cannot work at the same job for many, many years. Perhaps a new job keeps her excited as she learns new things.

Her daughter being in the hospital is more important than the assignment for the course. “I could care less about that class.” She talks with the Lord, “Lord, I appreciate you giving me
the opportunity.” She then calls her teacher, “I can’t do this assignment. I’m at the hospital with my daughter, and I’m not going to be able to finish [the course].” Her teacher responds, “No way. Just call me when it settles down” (focus group, pp. 5-6).

Then she comes home with her daughter from the hospital. When she walks in the door of her house, there is this book. Obviously, this is the moment in her life when the direction to become a teacher truly became obvious. She got the confirmation from the Lord. This also tells me that she is going to stay in education for a number of years.

Gwen has the book now in her 8th grade classroom. She had told us, “But if you come in my room that is what is in my room” (focus group, p. 6). It touched her heart [the story behind the book], and she knows it will touch others. This is why she can dose with the kids that nobody wants.

A Vision of Excellence. After getting the confirmation in (9), Gwen told her family about the course at the community college. She did not tell the bank, though. “…If the bank would have known that I was taking classes I think I would have been fired. It wouldn’t have been good…” (focus group, p. 3). It sounds as if this was something that she knew she had to keep quiet from the bank. She was protecting herself from people who would not understand. This tells me how she manages her thoughts. Maybe she does not realize that a change of career is a natural life progression. Even if she does, she may still be protecting herself from what she considers embarrassing for wanting a new career.

Gwen completed the course at the community college and enrolled in the School of Education. Her journey to begin her teaching career included taking education courses and completing internships in the schools, followed by student teaching. Internships required her to complete a specific number of observation hours all three semesters before student teaching. She
had good experiences in her internships. “I was in 2nd grade and 6th grade. I always thought I would want junior high, and there was no way that I would want 2nd graders, but it was really good, and I really enjoyed the kids” (focus group, p. 8).

Gwen repeatedly made concerned allusions when the other participants in the focus group talked about unpleasant experiences that they had with teachers who had been teaching for 25 years plus. For example, when another focus group participant explained how her student teaching experience took a turn for the worse, she stated, “I feel like you [university professors] shouldn’t send us to 25- to 30-year teachers because they are so set in their ways. They don’t like their schedule interrupted” (focus group, p. 7). Again, as another participant talked about her cooperating teacher having many good traits, she was not willing to make a change in the curriculum. Gwen remarked, “Those veteran teachers don’t want to change anything” (focus group, p. 13).

Eventually, the time came for student teaching. This involved 16 weeks in the classroom with the cooperating teacher every day. That is when she had to tell the bank that she was quitting again. In an email, I asked her if she talked with God about quitting or if she already knew that was what she was supposed to do since she had her confirmation from the Lord. “I tried to ask Him every step of the way. I hope He doesn’t look at it as lack of faith, but simply I’m learning how to lean on Him” (member checking, p. 2). She had already made an honest consideration about her career and appeared to be fully conscious of whom she was as a person. She accepted the risk and any consequences of not having a job, and it was obvious that she put her trust in God.

Gwen goes on to talk about her student teaching experience.

(11) …And then my fourth grade student teaching. It was good. She loved me, and I loved her…(focus group, p. 8)
She proceeded to tell a funny story that illustrated her great rapport with her cooperating teacher, and I could hear the enthusiasm, laughter, and passion in her voice. I probed for more information.

(12) R: Was there anything else that you learned from your cooperating teacher?

G: My cooperating teacher and I loved each other, but we both had the same weakness. We are unorganized. I wished that I would’ve been with a teacher that... I don’t want to fly by the seat of my pants, and she flew by the seat of her pants every day. That was not good for me. Every bit of organization I have, I work at it. At the end of the day I have a hundred math papers. I’ll be walking around the class, and the kids know that I’m absent minded. They’ll hand me a paper, and I’ll lay it down. They’ll say I gave that to you, and I say “no you didn’t…” (laughing) (focus group, p. 11)

Gwen’s personality allowed her to acknowledge her own weakness. She could laugh about it as if she understood it was part of being human.

(13) R: Would you want to be like your cooperating teacher?

G: Organization, no, organization. I don’t want to be like that. I really work at keeping things organized. That’s kind of a goal that I have. I am going to be, I am going to be an excellent teacher. When I started this I wanted to be the Illinois State Teacher of the Year. I’m not now. I’m kind of average. I’m an average teacher now. But I can see so much that I can do. I can do that. I think I’m not going to be Illinois State Teacher of the Year, but I am going to be a good teacher. (focus group, p. 12)

I wanted to make sure I understood what wanting to be Illinois State Teacher of the Year meant.

(14) R: So would you like to be like her except for the organization part?

G: No, I want to be like the Illinois State Teacher of the Year. I want to be better than [her cooperating teacher]. She was good, but good is the enemy of great. I want to get better. I’m not anywhere near what I should be, but that gives me the push to try to be better. I mean, I could be like her, but she’s retired now, and I’m not. I’m going to go further. I don’t want to get out of teaching. I don’t want to go into administration. No. (focus group, p. 12)
Gwen knew that she may not actually be the Illinois State Teacher of the Year someday, but she will be like that teacher. Not everybody has this aspiration or energy to accomplish this level of prominence. She has not looked back. She puts forth her best effort to conquer the traits. In a follow up interview, I asked her where the desire came from.

(15) I want to be excellent. I believe that I could be as good as an Illinois State Teacher of the Year. I’m not now. I know that, but that is how good I want to be. I have something inside me that makes me want to do very well. One thing that keeps me from it, I think, is my organization skills” (follow-up interview, p. 3)

She can self-evaluate. In an email, she shared with me how she learned to do this.

(16) I don’t know how accurate I am at evaluating myself! I just compare myself to a high standard and see where I am. If I’m not at the standard, I better change something. If I ever evaluate myself above the standard, I better get a higher standard. Good is the enemy of great. (member checking, p. 2)

Gwen’s desire to be excellent is ingrained in her. The key component of excellence is focus. She is highly committed to personal excellence, and she is attentive of one area that she would have to improve on before receiving such a title or being excellent enough to receive it. I still wanted to know where the inkling of becoming the Teacher of the Year came from, so I asked her in the follow up interview. “I never knew they even had that title until last year when I heard the Illinois State Teacher of the Year from [a nearby city] talk about it at a teacher’s institute. I was like, I want to do that, I think I could do that” (follow-up interview, p. 3).

I imagine that several dozen teachers listened to this talk, but only a few ever decide to try to fulfill the vision. In an email, I asked Gwen where this motivation comes from, because not everybody wants to work this hard.

(17) I want to be the best that I can be in everything. Understand, I’m not saying I am the best, I’m saying I want to be the best I can be. The Teacher of the Year is doing something right – that’s what I want to be. I don’t mind hard work. I was the valedictorian of my high school class (I wasn’t the smartest, I worked the hardest). That’s what kind of teacher I am. I am not the best (yet), but I will work until I am the very best I can be. (member checking, p. 2)
Is Teaching for Her? Gwen has demonstrated that she lives her life with joy. She had accessed the deep insight within herself to fulfill something important, her dream of becoming a teacher. She wants to teach the kids that nobody likes. Did she realize that her desire to be around kids goes all the way back to the pool hall? I even learned in a follow up interview that one of the student’s in her class this year is the daughter of one of the pool hall kids. In fact, he wrote she and her husband a letter recently.

(18) We got a letter from one of the kids the other day. He is in prison, and we haven’t seen him in 15 years. He wrote us a poem, something about being locked up. He talked about his time at the pool hall…He has always been in and out of prison…He is pitiful. He has nothing. As a matter of fact, he has a child who is in my class. I mentioned it to her, and I said something, “You know, I know your dad.” She said, “You know my dad?” (follow-up interview, p. 6)

I could tell this connection meant something to Gwen. Even though she later discovered, after the student’s mother called the school, that the father wasn’t part of the student’s life.

Gwen’s maturity shows in incidents like this. When I had originally asked her about staying in teaching she said, “I think I’ll stay in teaching until I write a children’s book…then I’ll go on to my next career of writing children’s books (laughing)” (focus group, p. 15). In an email a few weeks later she shared, “…I don’t see me doing anything else; I like what I do. If I get bored, I’ll change grades!” (member checking, p. 2). I can hear that she gets bored and can only stay in a career for so long. She has other interests, such as writing children’s books, but not until she retires.

(19) …I want to do that fulltime. But not right now. I’ll teach until I retire. I don’t think I could ever retire. I don’t ever see myself retiring. I have too much to do. I just can’t relax. I love it. I love teaching. I love it. I love the kids, those big mouth junior high kids, I love them. The girls that are snotty, I mean, they have redeeming qualities about them that you have to get to. I love them. (focus group, p. 16)
She knows that teaching is for her. She said it with such assurance. Just like in the pool hall days, she is surrounded by the kids that nobody else likes. But, I wanted to know more about her desire to be a children’s author.

(20) R: Do you have ideas for the children’s books? Are they picture books?

G: Yea. Yea. I am taking stories from the Bible and taking a different look at them. Like, one that I’ve written is about the creation, and it is about what was going on in heaven while God was creating earth. It is kind of a funny story…But, I have more ideas. I want to take the gospel, that’s Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and take stories from there and take people who are on the sidelines that you don’t hear much… (follow-up interview, p. 1)

The words, ideas, and visions for books are already forming in her head. She would not want to deprive herself of the chance to embrace that gift, but it might be years before she writes them down and undertakes publishing. This is what she did with teaching. She considered it years before taking the leap of faith.

I found out in the interview that Gwen has other interests besides writing children’s books. “…Did I mention evangelist, too? I want to do that, too. And, I write songs. I have so many things that I want to do” (follow-up interview, p. 1). She has kindness towards evangelists. “I see how hard ministers work. It is a hard, hard life. I would like to fill in for pastors” (follow-up interview, p.2). Sharing the message of God is not new to her. This is something that she used to do often before having children.

Gwen will follow the general philosophy in her life, looking to see if the door is open. But for now she will teach for quite a while. Her love, bliss, and liveliness permeate the school. She has too much energy and too many interests to really ever quite working. She recognizes her talents, dreams, and passions and is willing to explore new ideas and seize them when it is right.
Erin

Erin, in her early 30s, has a pleasant personality and is a joy to be around. She is teaching kindergarten, which happens to be in the classroom where she was a kindergarten aide for five years before becoming certified to teach. The classroom teacher took a leave of absence for one year, which then turned into a fulltime job for Erin when the teacher decided not to return to the classroom. Besides teaching kindergarten, she was certified to teach a fitness program last year and teaches it two nights a week.

In addition to having Erin in several of my method courses, she had taken a one-week winter immersion course with me, which was held in a large city about four hours from our school. She and others spent a few days in a diverse school setting where students spoke many different languages. Therefore, I have had numerous occasions to interact with her in a couple of different contexts.

Growing up, Erin had mixed feelings about school. She suspected she had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and was not a very good student. Her parents and other relatives had never gone to college, and the only job possibilities they seriously entertained were the cup factory and the nursing home. As a teenager, she worked two or three part-time jobs of this type, usually at the same time and as a teenage helper.

Reproducing the World of Her Family. Erin’s story starts in grade school. From the time she was a young girl, she thought she had ADD. “…I’m ADD, to be honest with you. Never been tested, but I never was focused. I was always off in my own little world…” (focus group, p. 2). Her teachers always told her she was a smart kid and that she could do the work, but she never felt that she could. Even today, she has things that bother her, like just feeling unorganized.
When she was about 5 years old, her dad was laid off from the railroad and found work at a cup factory where he has been for about 30 years. Her mother worked various jobs until Erin was about 15 or 20 years old, sometimes working two at a time. Erin remembers her mother working at a video store, hardware store, major retail store, and as a bartender at a couple of restaurants until she started at the cup factory. This permanent job was highly valued in her family. So, Erin saw her mother switch to the cup factory even though it wasn’t the most pleasant situation. Other members of the family members had similar permanent jobs in a nursing home. Therefore, that was the level of talk, and the big emphasis was on having a permanent job, but really, the only permanent jobs were the cup factory and the nursing home. Erin would soon find herself working various jobs, sometimes two at a time, as her mother once did.

During high school, she worked as a waitress, waiting tables and doing a bit of everything. She also had a second job, which she began during her junior year of high school, at the nursing home where her aunt and other family members worked, delivering ice to the rooms, spoon-feeding the residents, and making beds. Close to her high school graduation, she earned her Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certificate and started to think about permanent jobs. She thought she was making progress, working on a more professional level with patients. There was a time when she played with the idea of being a nurse:

(1) At one point I thought maybe I could do nursing. But, working as a CNA I went in and assisted with blood being drawn, and I got the whole light headed, you know, everything just drained from me, and I felt like I was going to pass out. I realized I’m not a nurse. You know, I can care for people, but I can’t do the blood part. I just can’t do it, but at one point I thought maybe I could go that route.” (follow-up interview, p. 3)

CNA was out as a permanent job. Her parents didn’t talk with her much about college when she was in high school. It was just implied that they wanted her to go. “When I had
trouble in grade school or high school she would just tell me they wanted me to do better than they did, but didn't involve themselves in helping me do better” (member checking #1, p. 1).

After graduating from high school, she decided to take on a third job at the cup factory, thinking she could make more money. “…Well, being 18 I had no idea what it was like to work 12 hours in the heat. It just killed me. I only lasted a couple of weeks” (follow-up interview, p. 4). Her parents did not want her to follow in the same career steps as them. “…My mom, especially, used the factory as one of her tactics to get me to better myself. She would tell me how terrible it was and that I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life…” (member checking #1, p. 1). Her mom could relate to the tiresome, long hot days and wanted her to have a job that was more rewarding.

By January, she took the initiative and enrolled in a community college, but soon found out that she didn’t qualify for financial aid. “…I saved my own money and talked to counselors and filled out applications…” (member checking #1, p. 1). Wanting to live on her own, she quit her jobs and moved near the college. She found two new jobs, again as a waitress and again as a CNA at a nursing home. She was trying to find her way, but after one semester, with no major in mind, she quit. “It was just gen eds. It was all undecided. I had no major goals in mind just wanted to work and make money…” (focus group, p. 2).

She went back to the cup factory, but after only two or three months she quit again. The pattern continued with these same kinds of jobs for a couple of years. In that period, she married, had a son, and decided to stay home. “I never thought I would work there for a career. I was just biding time until I found the right path out of there” (member checking #1, p. 1).

An Unexpected Opening. When her son was a little over a year old, the right path appeared when she got a job as a substitute teacher’s aide in a preschool classroom at her ‘old’
elementary school. A few months before, she had seen an ad in the paper for substitute teacher’s aides, lunchroom helpers and bus aides. “…That was the first time I had been in the school, since I went to school there. It just felt good. As soon as I walked in, I had a smile on my face, and it just felt great the rest of the day. I had found my calling” (follow-up interview, p. 4). In the focus group, she talked about how the teacher had a huge influence on her.

(2) …The way that the teacher worked with those kids, and my son was about two at the time, maybe one and a half, but I thought maybe I could be doing some of the stuff with him from watching her…I really enjoyed working with those kids and watching. I ended up doing a two month substitute job…So, I was in that particular classroom the whole time just watching her from that beginning of the day for those two months and saw how much they had improved. I thought, wow, she really made a difference, and I could do this and make a difference. I started subbing, and as I was there the other teachers enjoyed having me there and kept telling me that I was doing a good job…Anyway, they helped give me confidence that I needed, and I thought, you know what, maybe this is what’s for me. I loved it, and that is when I really started talking about going back to school… (focus group, p. 4)

At first, the smile on her face was because it was her old school, and there were good memories. However, the two months in that classroom had a huge impact on her. She saw how that teacher did make a difference with the preschool kids, she saw she could do the same kinds of things with her own son and it would be good for him, she saw she could make a difference with other kids, and she couldn’t stop talking about it every day when she came home. She had a completely new vision of what she could do in life. The other teachers enjoyed having her there and kept telling her she was doing a good job. That is when she decided she would go back to school to be a permanent teacher’s aide. Besides, getting a permanent job was what she was always working on. This new opening enlarged her previous horizon, and her husband strongly supported her. “…My husband suggested that I go back because I talked about it all the time and I had subbed as a teacher’s aide. He said…that’s what would make you happy…” (follow-up interview, p. 1). At the time you had to have 30 hours of any coursework to become a permanent
teacher’s aide, which would take her one year. So, she enrolled again in the same community college she had attended for one semester before and continued to be a sub on the days that she didn’t have class. Just before finishing the year, the No Child Left Behind act required 60 hours instead of 30. “…I didn’t know at the time exactly what I was going for. I just knew I wanted to be a teacher’s aide. I wanted to work with the kids” (follow-up interview, p.6). She continued subbing as an assistant’s teacher’s aide and within two years, she earned her associate’s degree in human services and was hired as a permanent teacher’s aide.

Now that she was a teacher’s aide, during the next two years she started thinking about what career path she should take. One day another teacher’s aide approached her and told her about the accelerated program where she could earn her bachelor’s degree in education.

(3) …I thought you know what, I could go ahead and go back to school. I could be a teacher, too. I wasn’t quite sure if I wanted to stop what I was doing because I enjoyed working with the kids and what I was doing. I didn’t have any other responsibilities. I didn’t have the parents, didn’t have a prep time. I just went in and did my job and left, which was really nice…We both decided to do it together, so we could ride back and forth, and it all just happened to fall into place. It wasn’t something that I actually all of a sudden one day decided I needed to do this. It just fell into my lap. It was just one of those things that I thought, maybe I should try that. (follow-up interview, p. 7)

Being a teacher with her own classroom might mean leaving the little kids and teaching in higher grade levels. It would definitely mean more responsibilities and that she couldn’t just leave at the end of the day. However, she took the challenge and enrolled in the program where I had her in my courses. Actually, I had both she and the other teacher’s aide in my courses. It took her two years to be certified as a full teacher, and in this period she continued to be a permanent teacher’s aide.
A Roller Coaster Ride to Becoming a Teacher. Erin completed internship hours while taking courses for her bachelor’s degree. These experiences were always positive, and she learned a lot. However, when it came time for student teaching, it wasn’t what she expected.

(4) …She had been there for about 32 years and was very set in her ways. She kept telling me that you can do whatever you want. Then when I did she’d get real nervous because they have to take this test in the spring, and she wanted to make sure I was teaching what was going to be on that test. She was by the book…All the workbook stuff and that was it. She had the exact same thing every week. It was just a different chapter…when my university supervisor came, she wasn’t happy with that. She wanted me to be doing more creative, more unique lesson plans. So, my cooperating teacher took that as an insult, and she became kind of … you know, she wouldn’t talk with me. I went for weeks where she wouldn’t talk with me anymore. (focus group, p. 7)

She continued with horrendous details. After the university supervisor would leave, Erin would cry and could not go back to class because her face was all beat red. She couldn’t wait for the student teaching experience to end. “…the very last day I was using the computer to do a weekly note to send home…She gathered my stuff up and hustled me out the door and pretty much shoved me in my car and sent me on my way…This was not a good situation” (focus group, p. 7).

Even though the student teaching experience turned out so imperfectly, Erin never lost her desire to be a teacher. After graduation, she did not immediately look for a classroom of her own. She decided to stay as a permanent teacher’s aide, hoping she would get hired there permanently. Feeling pretty disappointed when that did not happen, she decided to substitute teach in surrounding districts the following fall. After just four months, she received a call from the kindergarten teacher whom she had been a teacher’s aide for the last five years. The teacher was going to take a leave from January until the end of the school year and thought Erin would be perfect for the position. It turned out that the teacher decided not to return, so Erin has remained in that position.
During the focus group, I had asked the participants if they thought they’d stay in teaching. Erin responded:

(5) …I would love to stay in teaching. I’m happy where I’m at. I love what I do. I love the kids. I get them where you can see right away from the beginning that they have nobody at home to take care of them…I love them. I feel like that mother hen and take care of them. (focus group, p. 16)

When I asked her in the follow-up interview, she elaborated.

(6) …That’s my goal. You know, I’ve been a CNA, and I’ve worked in nursing homes, and I’ve worked in a cup factory, 12 hour days, you know, nights and the whole thing. I know what is out there, and I just like the place where I’m at, and I enjoy working with the kids. I’m getting to know their families, and I enjoy it. It’s just my niche. (follow-up interview, p. 3)

She is well beyond the previous jobs she has held. She wouldn’t even desire those jobs again. I then asked her if she had thought about getting her master’s degree.

(7) I considered it, but I’m happy where I’m at. I don’t think I’ll change my job. I know sometimes people do it for the pay scale, but right now I’m kind of comfortable, and I just want to kind of hang out where I’m at and not worry about too much extra stress right now. It’s something I’ll keep in the back of my mind” (follow-up interview, p. 2).

Erin is happy with her life right now, and is at a level of contentment.

Lizbeth

Lizbeth, in her late 20s, is a bright, energetic female. She comes from a very nice family. Many of her family members work at the university, including her mother, aunt, sister, and brother-in-law, and I know several of them personally. In fact, I had her twin sister, who is now in her sixth year of teaching in a county school, in the traditional program, and I was her academic advisor, along with her advisor on an honor’s project. During the follow-up interview, I asked Lizbeth about her sister. She told me that she is working on her master’s degree and is planning to graduate in about six months.
Lizbeth is somewhat unusual because originally she got a history degree without any thoughts of becoming a teacher. It is true that since being a junior in high school, she has been coaching cross-country and track for various schools, but she never connected that in her mind with becoming a teacher. She was planning to go on for a master’s degree in history and make some money first when by a fluke she got a job working with kids and got interested in teaching. She now teaches second grade.

**Interested in History since Junior High School.** Knowing a bit about Lizbeth and her family, I assumed that she probably knew she would go to college when she was in high school. In the follow-up interview, I asked her about this. “Yes. I definitely thought about college. My parents wanted me to be able to do that because they hadn’t gone that route. They wanted us to have that opportunity, and um, you know, I just knew that whatever profession I was going to choose, I needed college as that step to getting there” (follow-up interview, p. 2). Then when did she first think of history as a possible major? “I had kind of been between like biology or history when I was in high school. Really, I went the history route because it is also something I’ve just always enjoyed and had a passion for since even when I was in junior high. I had kind of had a bad experience with a math class in high school, right in my senior year and so that kind of scared me with the biology route. So, I said you know what, I really enjoy history, so that’s the route I’m going to take” (follow-up interview #2, p. 2). She realized her interest in history when she was in junior high, and she probably attended to it and gave it more time because it never left her throughout the years. She began working on her history degree right after high school, graduating four years later.

During the beginning of the focus group, I had asked Lizbeth if she had any thoughts of becoming a teacher when she coached cross country and track during high school.
(1) …it was just kind of like, I like this, but it’s just extra money…There were no thoughts of being a teacher. I never really considered teaching as one of my careers until after my first degree. I was going to get my masters and then get my doctorates [in history] and go into the university or government, or you could go to a museum, you know, a lot of different options there…(focus group, p. 2)

She still has the same coaching job today that she started when she was in high school, but that job did not influence her to become a teacher. Later in an email, I asked her if there had been a specific area of history that she was interested earning her master’s degree in. “I was looking to focus in European History, specifically Germany in World War II. It tends to be a masters, but you can choose specific areas to focus in” (member checking, p.1).

Four Tumultuous Months of Change. In the focus group, I already knew that Lizbeth had a history degree, so I asked her how she got from there to education.

(2) Well, I started off with a history degree, and the way I got into education was I took a job as a teaching assistant as a way to make some money in order to have some time to do my masters. But when I was working as a teaching assistant I really got to where I liked helping the students, you know, being able to explain the topics we were working with. Instead of pursuing my masters, I decided to go back and get a second degree in elementary education… (focus group, p. 1)

I asked her to talk more.

Before I got my history degree I had considered it, but I never really decided to pursue it. I just thought, you know what, I don’t really think that is for me. I like working with kids, but I don’t think it’s what I really want to do fulltime. I was content with my coaching and things like that…So, it wasn’t really something I ever considered, and it was never anything that my advisor said that I might want to look into. I really never even thought about it either… (focus group, p. 2)

After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in history, she planned on pursing her master’s degree, but by the following January everything had changed. She wanted to make some money before starting on the degree, so in the fall she got a job with the local school district as an alternative placement room teaching assistant working with 7th graders. Actually, that was her
first contact with teaching, and that is when her career decision quickly changed. According to her, the alternative placement room is for the kids who “didn’t make it in their classroom” (follow-up interview 1, p. 7). She described her brief time in the classroom:

(3) …When I did actually start working as a teaching assistant, the first three months I worked as the alternative placement room assistant. That’s an experience all in itself. I was going to transfer out, but I ended up getting a pre-K program and that is where I was really able to decide… I do want to be able to kind of guide kids…That is when in November or December that I decided that I really wanted to pursue getting my education degree. I thought I have to get my application in fast…It was just, I mean, I enjoyed when I worked in the APR room. I enjoyed when it was more like one or two or three kids. I was able to give them more one on one attention and everything instead of, you know, when you had your days when there were like seven, eight, or nine kids and it was just trying to control the chaos. You know, coaching and being an assistant kind of helped me make up my mind. (focus group, p. 2)

During the follow-up interview, she talked more about her experience in the APR room. “…If they are sitting there and they are struggling, you are physically there and can help them. I really enjoyed it because a lot of the times those are the kids that you see acting out in class because they don’t understand and getting it one on one their attitude is so different. Their behavior is so different, and I knew that going into teaching I’d have struggles. But, if I could help kids that was something that I wanted to do” (follow-up interview 1, p. 5). I also asked her what she had meant by ‘an experience all in itself.’ “…It was interesting. You had your good days and your bad days and far more to the extreme than what I see in my classroom now. So, whenever I’m writing referrals [in her current classroom], I’m feeling kind of bad about it” (follow-up interview 1, p. 7). It was a powerful experience for her. I assumed that since she was the assistant, she had a certified teacher in the classroom with her. However, after asking her about it during the follow-up interview, I found out that was not the case.

(4) It was just me. That was it. I had the 7th-grade kids and another lady had the 8th-grade kids. At the time, just as long as you had a college degree you could teach.
But, now they have changed it, and they do want you to have more of an education background to be an assistant. (follow-up interview 1, p. 7)

Overall, she realized that she was kind of doing the same things working with students while coaching and being an assistant and that she should become a teacher.

After three months of working in the APR room, Lizbeth transferred to a pre-K position at the vocational center in the same district. The center had programs for high school students who were interested in developing knowledge and skills for career in areas such as education, cosmetology, firefighting, auto body and many more. She transferred to a pre-K program where students could come into a five day a week program and learn how to deal with little kids. In fact, that is where she went to preschool, so she was somewhat familiar with it. She helped the teachers get everything ready for the week and supervised the high school students as they created materials and worked with the preschool kids. Lizbeth explained why she pursued the position.

(5) Part of the reason that I choose to switch over was that I didn’t feel I had as much support at [the middle school] as I would have liked…We were far away from the office, so it wasn’t like anybody could get there and help out quickly if we really needed help. We didn’t have an intercom in the room. We had a walkie-talkie, which half of the time didn’t get answered. As much as I enjoyed working with the students, I didn’t feel that I was prepared the way I should be and able to, one, keep me safe, keep the other students safe and still be able to help them. (follow-up interview 1, p. 5)

The job with the school district that was supposed to only be for a little while, so she could make some money to have some time to earn her master’s degree, ended up being the confirmation she needed to become a teacher. “…I mean, it was just so much fun. That is the best way to put it. It was so much fun to work with the little ones and the high school students. It was just amazing to see with some of the high school students how much it did teach them and
how different they acted with the little ones than when they acted and had to put on their face for everybody else” (follow-up interview 1, p. 5).

Within about four months of working for the school district, she quickly got her paperwork turned in to the university to pursue a degree in education. Within a number of weeks, she began working on her second degree, while continuing to work at the vocational center. Maybe she was not that deeply set on history after all, since she didn’t pursue the master’s degree. Later in an email, I asked her if she felt that she gave something up by not getting her master’s degree in history. “I love history and still enjoy reading books on the subject, and I first wondered if I was giving something up but I quickly came to find that I wasn’t. I really enjoy elementary, but I am not closed to the idea of one day teaching middle school history” (member checking, p. 1).

**Experience in the Program.** During her coursework for her elementary education degree, which she piggybacked on with her bachelor’s degree in history, Lizbeth had to complete internship hours in both elementary and middle school. “…I like middle school kids. I really do because you can have some different conversations with them, but I’m one of those people who don’t particularly enjoy their attitudes…” (focus group, p. 3). With her internship experience she was happy to go into the elementary classrooms, but had reservations about middle school. But, perhaps middle school is still an option.

When Lizbeth explained her reservation about middle school students’ attitudes another participant jumped in and told her about a middle school social studies position in her district for fall. Lizbeth seemed interested. “Really? Oh. Hmmm” (focus group, p. 4). Apparently, the other participant thought so too, because she continued to tell her she’d want to apply right now. Lizbeth responded, “Social studies is what, you know, with my history degree, social studies is
what I love. I am going to have to think about that” (focus group, p. 4). After internships came third grade student teaching. She loved it.

**Teaching is for Her.** Lizbeth said that she hoped she would get hired in the same building that she did her student teaching in, and she did. It sounded like she was happy. Was teaching for her?

(6) I think so. Yeah. I have my frustrations, but part of it is since I have such a low academic class this year. I don’t know how it got split up because the other class is very high. I was like great…But I really enjoy my class and what I teach. I think it is my worries getting the kids up to where they need to be and deciding if they need to go to third grade or stay another year in second.

Making sure I understood her correctly, I told her I’m hearing her say that she will probably stay in teaching for her whole career.

(7) I think so. I think I stay in it because of the kids. I enjoy seeing their growth throughout the year…So for me it is the kids and even the ones who frustrate me, I enjoy seeing when they get something. (focus group, p. 6 & 7)

From the focus group discussion I knew that Lizbeth wanted to get her master’s degree in history, so I was wondering if she had thought about getting it in teacher education.

(8) I’m not pursuing my master’s degree yet. I’m probably going to wait until next year and start looking into programs, so that I can pay off some of my loans that I have right now. That is something that I am thinking about, what I want to get my masters in…I know that I don’t want to do administration. I really enjoy teaching, and I see the headache that the administrators go through every day and that is not what I want. I’ve thought about what I want to get it in. Do I want reading? I’ve even thought about special education. I do want to get my masters and then get my plus 32. (focus group, pp. 7-8)

I thought I would ask her to talk more about it during the follow-up interview. “…I have a couple of ladies who I work with who are going to get their masters as well. We’re looking into maybe doing the program together, so we can hold each other accountable” (follow-up interview, p. 7). So she will spend some time looking into some different programs. Will
Leah

Leah, in her late 20s, chose a teacher education program that allowed her to take courses one night a week in an accelerated format because she was pregnant and needed to continue to work. She filed a petition to be accepted into the program because she was only 22 years old, and the age requirement was 24. She now teaches special education.

Influenced by her second grade teacher, Leah always thought teaching would be the career she would choose. However, even though she knew what she wanted, after high school she got sidetracked by her parents and went into nursing. During her second year of college, she spent time in the hospitals and realized it was not for her. She continued with general coursework and graduated with an associate’s degree in science from a community college. Then she enrolled in the teacher education program.

Listening to the Parents. When Leah was in high school, she knew she would go to college, but she didn’t know what she wanted to major in, even though she was interested in education. During the focus group, she talked about how she respected her second grade teacher.

(1) I pretty much always said that was what I wanted to be…I always said it came from my second grade teacher. I’m still good friends with her now because I’m good friends with her daughter… I just feel like I always wanted to be a teacher…My parents didn’t want me to be in so much debt, and they could afford [the community college]. So, they said this would be good and then you will have this, and you can go on from there if you want to be a nurse. Well, I’m easily influenced. I was one who couldn’t really go away. I worked throughout high school. I played sports in high school. I always paid for a lot of my own stuff. (focus group, p. 3)
Nonetheless, education was not the direction she initially went when she began college. A little nervous about choosing a career, she talked with her parents, and they convinced her to go into nursing. “…Making a decision that was going to be stuck forever was scary. So, I guess it was hard for me to actually make my own decision on that, and then whenever my parents started saying this and that, because they knew I wasn’t sure about anything. Then I’m like, ok, maybe I like this…” (follow-up interview, p. 5). Because her parents could afford the community college, she decided to go there instead of stacking up loans to attend other colleges. Throughout high school and college she worked a few jobs, usually two or three at a time, and paid for a lot of her own things. Of course, none of these jobs was going to be permanent; an ice cream shop, restaurant, and a diagnostics manufacturer.

As a result, after her high school graduation, she immediately began at the community college. She took a year and a half of general education courses before starting in the nursing program. Then after a year in the program, she realized that nursing was not her passion.

(2) Well, I did the whole first year of just getting the prerequisites and the basic classes…But, it was once I was actually in the nursing setting; I started out at one of the local hospitals. I was in the extended care unit, and I really wasn’t at all interested in it…Then the next semester I was at the other hospital in the med surge…I still didn’t like that. The next one was the pediatrics unit, and I thought, no, I don’t like either of these. I couldn’t keep spending my time in all of these places. I started despising going to the hospitals. That’s when I decided.

Wanting to know how she decided to go into education, I immediately asked her:

Well, it was a lot of thought throughout the whole process of whenever I was in the nursing program. I continuously thought about whenever I was going there what I actually want to do. The big thing that was always on my mind was, you know, I do want to have a family. I do want to have the life where I can be home with the kids during the summer and the holidays. I do want to go back to that whole way of thinking that I could be kind of like my second grade teacher. You know, there were all kinds of different factors that came into play whenever I was thinking about that. So, it was finally that decision that, you know, I’m not happy.
with what I’m doing right now. I know it’s a lot of school and this and that, but I still wasn’t happy with it. So, I changed. (follow-up interview, p. 5)

The second grade teacher reappeared again and was in her thoughts often. The ideal was not really teaching, but having a family life with free summers. After some careful thought, she decided to change her career. Because of the change from nursing to an associate’s degree in science, it took her three and a half years to graduate. The coursework for completion was different, and she graduated with more credits than what she would have needed to if she had started with an associate’s degree in science. Shortly after graduation from the community college, she and her boyfriend, whom she had dated for a couple of years, were expecting a baby.

**Becoming a Teacher.** From the time, she left the nursing program she knew she would go into education. Since the university accepted her petition for the age requirement, Leah immediately began in the program to become certified to teach elementary education. The program required her to have an area of concentration for middle school, and she chose social science since she had so many psychology and sociology courses from the community colleges. During her second semester of school, her daughter was born. I remember when she would occasionally bring her into the education office. My intuition told me she was a caring mother. Leah and her boyfriend had gone their separate ways by the time their daughter was born.

Throughout her year and a half of coursework, Leah completed internships that went well. Her student teaching experience was positive, too, and she learned a lot.

(3) I loved my student teaching…My cooperating teacher grew up with my mom. They hadn’t seen each other for years so they kind of got back in touch. I really learned a lot from my student teaching. She was there the first two weeks and then she actually left for Europe. So, after two weeks I was just thrown in there, but I think I learned a lot more…I had a sub, but she was just there. When the teacher came back she commented on how much I had changed when she was gone…I would do it one way, and she would give me all different kinds of examples. (focus group, p. 5)
Leah valued the feedback she received from her cooperating teacher. Because of her pregnancy she had to double up on a couple of courses the last semester, but she still managed to graduate on time after two years.

**Discovering Her Niche.** Leah got her teaching certificate in elementary education, but today she is actually teaching special education. This happened through a series of apparently accidental circumstances. All of her first four teaching assignments were in special education, not in elementary education, for which she was qualified. She had enough coursework to have an emergency certificate to teach special education. Amazingly, most of her assignments were at different levels, one in elementary, another in middle school, and two in the high schools. The middle school and one of the high schools were in the same district. The experience she got in each job helped her get the next. The January after graduating in December she was fortunate to get a job, and it happened that the job was for one semester in middle school special education. “…The job that was open was for special education…I never thought I’d want to do that, but they hired me. I knew it would just be for one semester. So I took the…job, and I really enjoyed it…” (focus group, p. 1). The school was only a half hour driving distance from the suburb where she grew up and even less from the city where she was currently living. The job went well, but she knew she would have to find a job for the fall.

One of the schools she applied to didn’t have anything for her in general elementary education, but seeing she had special education experience the school called her back the following week to see if she’d be interested in a special education position at the elementary level. “…So, of course, I’m going to take the job. After I took that job I realized that I did want to get into special education…” (focus group, p. 1). The school was in a mid-size town where she lived.
By spring, the district where Leah had taught middle school special education for one semester called her back. Their high school special education teacher was retiring, and they wanted her to apply. She got the job, and she liked the special education environment at the high school level in that school. Yet, during the school year, she bought a house in the suburb where she had grown up and where her parents still lived. In addition, she wanted her daughter to someday go to school there. After one year, a job in the suburban district where she had bought the house opened up, so she took that.

At this point, Leah is in her second year in the special education position in the high school in the suburban district where she lives. “…I was equally happy at any level of special education. I believe everything happens for a reason I guess. Since the job opened up in special education, I loved it. I feel that I have learned so much just by working in the field and now I have 33 credit hours towards my masters in special education. It has been in my mind before whether or not I want to apply for a general education position, but I always end up choosing to stick with special education. Maybe someday in the future I will change, but I really don't know” (member checking #2). Recently married, she now has a 2½-year-old stepson.

During the focus group, I had asked her to talk about her master’s degree:

(4) …I am going to stay in special education. I really enjoy it. I don’t know. A few years down the road, I will still have my teaching certificate if I want to change to something different. I do like special education. I think I will stay in it. After my masters I have thought about pursuing my plus 32. I think if I would do that it would just be like continuing education. I wouldn’t go for my doctorates. I wouldn’t do anything higher up. I wouldn’t want to be in administration. I want to stay in teaching, so I would just take courses. I always wanted to get my masters…(focus group, p. 7)

Leah will graduate with her master’s degree in about 10 months, and I think the likelihood of her staying in education is good.
Brandy

Brandy, in her late 20s, is a practical person who makes strong decisions, expresses herself strongly, and knows how to get things done. She taught 6th grade math her first year and is now teaching 8th-grade math in the same school district.

In Brandy’s youth, school was the best part of her day. She knew what to expect when she was at school, and that was not usually the case at home. Her mother was a drug addict, and they lived in extreme poverty. Her home was chaotic and people were in and out all of the time. Shortly after Brandy graduated from high school, her mother was sent to prison. So, she comes out of very rough circumstances, but she has tremendous inner-self direction. There are a number of things that come from these circumstances. For example, today she teaches in a diverse setting with many students who are already headed towards a life of drugs. In fact, in her teaching she is committed to straightening out kids’ lives. Besides the bad circumstances when she grew up, she became a bright, successful individual who has two children and recently remarried. When her mother was released from prison, she naturally pulled her mother into a healthier lifestyle by enrolling her in all of her courses at the community college that she herself was taking, and today her mother is working on a doctoral degree.

Bumpy Start in College. Brandy’s home life was anything but ordinary growing up. “…I had a really rough childhood with my mom’s addiction and extreme poverty…” (focus group, p. 5). Her parents divorced when she was two years old; only five years ago, at the age of 23, did she see her father for the first time after her parents’ divorce. She also has a brother, who is seven years younger than her, but he has a different father. Her mother never remarried but had boyfriends in and out of the house.
Even though life was difficult growing up, Brandy figured out how to be successful in school. She was very good in math, but reading was a problem. “School was just really easy for me. There was nothing hard about school except for reading. Reading was really hard for me to pick up…” (follow-up interview, p. 2). That one aspect was helped very quickly when she was in sixth grade. Her teacher figured out that she was able to comprehend better when she read silently. She was then placed in the high reading group, which was a better environment for her.

Brandy had a long history of tutoring, and it began in high school where she tutored a lot of her friends in math. “Well, math was always really easy for me, and it was something that all of my friends struggled with…you can’t sit there and watch a friend fail…I was not doing anything different…than the teacher did. They just weren’t ready to hear it from the teacher” (follow-up interview, p. 1). She recognized that the teacher was doing the right things, which may have been one reason why she was good in school.

During high school, college was only communicated in a quiet manner. “…I think it was always kind of understood in my family that you were going to go to college. Especially where my grandparents and my aunt and uncle and all of them are concerned…it was always expected that you graduate and you go to college…” (follow-up interview, p. 1).

Her career tests in high school always came back showing that she should major in business or math in college. “…I started with business because I knew that I didn’t want to be like a mathematician because that would be terrible. Who wants to sit and discover new prime numbers all day? So, I leaned towards business and that was just so terribly boring…” (follow-up interview, p. 2). She did, however, tutor the girls who lived on her floor in math. She continued with her dissatisfaction, “…I got to where I was skipping classes because it was so boring. I was like, if I’m already skipping classes and I’m only in my sophomore year, I should
probably change to something else. I liked the economics class, though. But, that was all math” (follow-up interview, p. 3). Even though she was bored, she continued as a business major.

At that point, Brandy started having financial aid issues because her mom had just been sent to prison. The school did not know how to handle it and pushed her paperwork to the bottom of the stack. She eventually had to come up with $16,000 or drop out. In her first year, she had been in the work-study program, and the previous summer she worked at a department store, but those jobs were just for spending money. Not able to come up with the money, she left the university during the middle of her third semester. She moved in with her boyfriend. “…He was going to rent an apartment with a friend of his, but when I lost my financial aid we decided that we were going to move in together…” (follow-up interview, p. 3). Her grandma and aunt were upset that she left school. They thought she was dropping out of school so she could live with her boyfriend.

**Community College: Realizing She Should Teach.** Brandy very energetically started the community college in January. She worked two fulltime jobs that enabled her to do that. One was at the department store where she had worked the previous summer, and the other was at a major retail store. These helped with rent and tuition and books at the community college.

One day during the first semester she found herself distracted as she thought about a career.

(1) …I remember sitting in English lit. I was just sitting there kind of daydreaming thinking what am I going to do with my life. Then it just hit me that I should be a teacher. Just like out of nowhere. I had never considered it…Then I thought what am I going to teach. I don’t know. I don’t know what I am going to teach. I wanted either little kids or big kids… (focus group, p. 2)

When in the follow-up interview, I reminded her of the moment and she commented,

“…I was just sitting there thinking, man, you really suck. I was like, this is awful…I could do this so much better…” (follow-up interview, p. 6).
The rightness of this realization soon became apparent in the remainder of her stay at the community college. She found herself hanging out in the tutoring room, and the instructors soon asked her if she would work with some of the students who did not understand the material. “…I was like, “I would probably be a really good math teacher…” (follow-up interview, p. 7). At the end of the first year, she found out she was pregnant and her mom got out of prison. Talking with her mom, she realized that her mom had no direction. “…Just maintain a normal life and see this is where you meet normal people that are not on crack” (focus group, p. 3). “…I enrolled her in all of my classes and helped her get through it…” (focus group, p. 3). In fact, they were lab partners in biology. She helped her mom with her other coursework. “…Her writing was horrendous…” (follow-up interview, pp. 6-7). The following spring they graduated together. Brandy earned two associate degrees at the same time, an Associate in Arts and an Associate in Science. Shortly after graduation, she found out she was expecting a second baby. She and her boyfriend married that summer, and their second child was born the following February. A year after earning her two associate’s degrees, she decided to earn her bachelor’s degree in elementary education. She began the fall after her son was born.

**Earning Her Bachelor’s Degree and Getting Her First Teaching Assignment.**

Married, with two children, Brandy heard a commercial about a program that would allow her to earn her bachelor’s degree in an accelerated format taking one course at a time in the evening. She had kind of heard about it through word of mouth, too. “…I was like, that would be right for me, but it was hard to get me into it because I was under age.” At the time, she was only 22 years old, and the age requirement was 24. She filed a petition and was accepted into the program. To earn some money while attending school, she babysat her friends’ children.
As part of the program, Brandy had to take the middle school courses, which meant she would have a middle school endorsement in some area. She decided to get her endorsement in math. In the middle of the program, she took on an immersion course that allowed her to spend a week in a diverse school setting in a nearby large city. That trip made a big impression on her. “…I went on the…trip, and that is when I was positive I wanted to teach with the city kids” (focus group, p. 7). By the way, I was the instructor that went with them. She went on to have a positive student teaching experience in a 6th-grade classroom. By the time she graduated with her bachelor’s degree two years later, she had divorced.

Then it was time to apply for a permanent job.

(2) …I needed a bigger city and more pay. I just threw my cards up in the air, and I applied to like every single school in the [nearby larger areas]. One day out of the blue a principal called me and said we need a 6th-grade math teacher…I told her I could drive down there. It’s only like a two or three hour drive. She said, “Well, let’s just have this phone interview first.” She liked me so much from the phone interview she wanted to hire me. I said, “Yes, I have a job!” (focus group, p. 3)

She continued to illustrate her temperament. Four months after she started school as a 6th-grade math teacher, she received phone calls from some schools that needed a math teacher. She could not believe that the schools had made it through the beginning of the school year without a math teacher. However, she was happy in the district where she was teaching and decided to stay. Because of downsizing of the school, she had to leave her 6th-grade position after her first year and move to another building in the same district.

(3) …I’m teaching…eighth-grade algebra and pre-algebra, and I love it. I miss my friends at the old building because that building functions way better than where I’m at…But I love what I do. I just lock myself in my room all day and do what I do. [My school] is really nice, too.(focus group, p. 4)

She went on with memories of her old building, “…when I was in 6th grade. We were the closest of friends, and then I had to move and I was stuck in this school that is very cliquey,
very catty, very dysfunctional…I don’t even talk to the math teacher on my team…” (focus group, pp. 4-5). She continued to share the unpleasant happenings. It made me wonder if she would want to stay in the same building next year. “Yeah, I’m not going to leave. I love my kids. That is actually why I got into teaching. I wanted to help kids who are in my situation because I had a really rough childhood with my mom’s addiction and extreme poverty…” (focus group, p. 5). She knew before she got hired that she wanted to teach in a troubled environment.

(4) …I knew I wanted a bumpy ride. I really wanted to teach in inner-city schools. I knew I wanted a bumpy ride. [R asked if it was because of the upbringing that she had with her mom and that she wanted to help people so that they didn’t end up down that track.] Yeah. I have had some real conversations with some of my students who are already on drugs, their parents are on drugs. They’re in gangs and all this and that. I just snatch them up and close the door. I tell them you can get out. This is how. Look what you are doing. (focus group, p. 5)

She got engaged to one of the teachers in the same building. He teaches social studies and is their football coach.

(5) I keep in the back of my mind that there are two other middle schools that are begging me to come there. My finance is at my building, too. If it gets worse, we both might go to a different building. I really love my students, though. We’ve got a lot of money. But discipline is a problem, and they throw it back on the teachers. (focus group, p. 13)

**Remarried and Working Toward Her Master’s Degree.** By the time we met for a follow-up interview, Brandy had remarried and had begun working on her master’s degree. Her district is paying for the first 15 credit hours, and she has nine of the credits completed so far. She is interested in curriculum and design in the area of math, but would have to leave the classroom to pursue that. She had mentioned curriculum and design during the focus group, but with hesitation. “I couldn’t imagine leaving my classroom, though.” I asked her what makes her stay. She continued, “It’s my students. I love them to death” (focus group, p. 12). I asked her what her thoughts were on it when we met during the follow-up interview. “At some point, I’ll
probably get into something like that” (follow-up interview, p. 8). But, for now she will continue in her middle school classroom.
CHAPTER 5
CROSS-CASE DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, by giving portraits, I tried to depict the essential elements of the whole story of how these nontraditional students got into teaching and to what extent their commitment to teaching was permanent. These portraits are intended to help the readers understand these individuals’ lives as career switchers. Of the nine participants, I wrote four longer portraits and four shorter ones. I did not write one portrait because I could not get a sufficiently unified coherent larger impression to make a single story about one participant.

This overall discussion chapter first addresses what I believe to be significant demographic patterns. The next major heading, Motivation and Inspiration to Transition into Teaching, identifies three emergent phenomena that are of general interest that one can see in the interview: (a) feeling of incompleteness, (b) moment of awakening (I am supposed to teach), and (c) teaching not on their horizon. The next major heading, Using Past Skills and Maturity from Earlier Experiences, discusses how these career switchers use skills from their earlier jobs, careers, and life experiences in their classrooms today. The last major heading, Larger Life Aspects, deals with my original research question, “Are they going to stay in teaching?”

Variables

As mentioned in my introductory chapter, the definition of nontraditional students varies, since educational institutions are allowed to create their own definition. Basically, any student who does not begin college directly from high school is considered nontraditional. The traditional student is typically described as a young adult ranging in age from 21 to 23, while the nontraditional student typically comes from other careers, having more life experiences, and may be in their 40s and 50s (Podsen, 2002). Other researchers find that the typical age range describing traditional students is 18 to 24 years and nontraditional students are usually 25 or
older (Hoyt et al., 2010). The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2008), a national nonprofit organization, defines the nontraditional student as someone who has delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, works full-time while enrolled, or has dependents other than a spouse. Many of these descriptions apply to my participants. The following table illustrates basic characteristics. Note that all participants were working while they were in the program.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (Pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age When they Enrolled in the Program</th>
<th>Had a BA When They Entered the Program</th>
<th>Est. Family SES*</th>
<th># of Children at the Time of Interview</th>
<th>Master’s Degree**</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brandy</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
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<td>45</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>No</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1 plus a Stepchild</td>
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<tr>
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<td>43</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>L</td>
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* High, Medium, Now
** Started, Completed, Interested, Not Interested

To my mind, my participants clearly divided into two groups, those who were in their 30s or later, and those who were in their 20s when they started the teacher education program. The sample seems typical of the population of students enrolled in the program (I have taught several courses each semester in the program since it began in 2006), and I am familiar with the population. Five of the participants (Hillary, Suzanne, Gwen, Paul, Erin) were 30 or older when they began. Four of my participants (Brandy, Leah, Lizbeth, Kate) were in their 20s when they began in the program. In fact, three of them (Leah, Lizbeth, Brandy) petitioned out of the age requirement of 24. They were working full time, and Leah was a single mother of one. Lizbeth
was single, and Brandy was married with two young children. Kate, about whom I did not write a portrait, was initially a traditional student at the university. After completing coursework, she took two years off to study for the certification exam. She then enrolled in the accelerated program to student teach. Thus I will omit her in the remainder of the chapter. The eight participants are a representative sample from the program.

**Degrees**

When students enter into the accelerated teacher education program at this university, they either already have a degree in another subject area or may be earning their first bachelor’s degree. If they already have a bachelor’s degree they may choose to get certified by taking the education courses, along with student teaching. They may choose to earn another bachelor’s degree, which would involve taking the education courses, along with student teaching, and any additional general education courses. This would be their preference and might mean doubling up on courses. Students who enter without a bachelor’s degree have typically taken most of their general education courses at a community college, leaving only their education courses and student teaching to complete.

Four of the participants (Suzanne, Gwen, Paul, Lizbeth) entered the program with bachelor degrees. Everybody, except Lizbeth, chose not to earn a second degree, which is most common. At one time, all four teachers earned previous degrees in different areas for various reasons. Of these four participants, three of them (Suzanne, Paul, Lizbeth) are interested in earning their master’s degree in education in the near future.

The other four participants (Hillary, Erin, Brandy, Leah) entered the program earning their first bachelor’s degree. Once Hillary graduated from high school, she quickly moved into management in the food service industry without any college coursework. The other three, on
the other hand, entered the program with an associate’s degree. After only three years of
teaching, Hillary has already completed her master’s degree in elementary education. Brandy
and Leah have already begun the coursework for the degree, and Lizbeth plans to begin soon.

**SES and College Bound**

The participant’s family SES is estimated based on the interviews that I had with them.
Two of the participants (Brandy, Suzanne) grew up in a low SES family, while five participants
(Paul, Hillary, Gwen, Leah, Lizbeth) grew up in a middle SES family. Erin was raised in a low
to middle SES family, but the level of family SES didn’t mean that the participants were
encouraged to attend college. Despite the poverty that two of the participants experienced
growing up, this disadvantage didn’t prevent them from being successful in their coursework and
eventually graduating from college.

Three of the participants (Suzanne, Erin, Hillary) didn’t grow up with anyone in their
family or anyone from their high school, such as a teacher or counselor, talking with them about
college. Yet these participants didn’t come from the same SES. Their family members only
thought about having a job. They were hard-working people who earned enough money to pay
the mortgage and provide for the family.

The other five participants (Brandy, Paul, Gwen, Leah, Lizbeth) heard either their parents
or some other relative emphasize the importance of a college education. In fact, two participants
had a parent with a college degree. Paul’s mother was a teacher, and Gwen’s mother was a
nurse. All five of these participants were expected to attend college and would come to believe
that it would be the gateway to a better future – one answer to a happy and fulfilling life. Of
these participants, Brandy is different because she grew up in a low SES, and the others did not.
Another interesting point is that all of the participants worked while they were in the program. Those who worked full time either quit or moved into a part-time position while student teaching for the last semester. In addition, six of the eight participants had children to raise while going through the program.

**Motivation and Inspiration to Transition into Teaching**

The methodology I used asks the investigator to look for whether there are signs of inspiration and deeper motivation for going from their nontraditional life before into teaching. Two types of inspiration emerged during the interviews, feeling of incompleteness and moments of awakening. There were also cases where teaching was not on the horizon, but somehow they found themselves in a teaching situation opportunity and realized that this was what they should be doing. These three are not non-overlapping categories. Feeling of incompleteness is found mostly in the older participants 35+ who had complete careers. Moment of awakening refers to the participant having a moment where they realized they should be teaching and then started to work toward that. The third category refers to cases where teaching was not on the horizon for some of the participants, but they found themselves in a situation where they were teaching and recognized it as something they wanted to do. In a sense, all of the participants are finding more completeness in teaching. Nevertheless, each of these three individual categories represent phenomenon that is found in several of the portraits.

**Feeling of Incompleteness**

Three of the older participants (Suzanne, Gwen, Hillary) gave the impression that there was a feeling of incompleteness as they went through their lives and that they started searching, consciously or unconsciously, for a more fulfilled life. They eventually got to the point where they were moved to make a change in their lives. Whatever their reason for changing careers, it
seems that in teaching they found a career that they are passionate about and that they find very fulfilling.

What is unusual is the vast distance from the stirrings of incompleteness to finding completeness in teaching with all three participants. In the beginning, nothing motivated Suzanne to want to go to college. When all of the kids went to college, she did not understand the point. There definitely seems to have been something that was driving in her towards college. While working numerous jobs, she made little tentative efforts at college. She eventually understood what high school and college was about. She did not know what to expect in college and the realities in her life kept her from proceeding. Twelve years after her high school graduation, she made a fourth attempt at it. After graduating from the community college with two associate degrees her self-confidence was gradually growing, and she was experiencing some success and was starting to feel some completeness. Three years later, she decided to earn her bachelor’s degree in business education but the program was dropped. I interpreted her move of declaring a degree in business education as an initial move toward teaching, but she only firmly decided to go into teaching after she graduated with her bachelor’s degree in business administration and was pregnant with her second child. Education was always subordinate to being there for her kids. Her daughter was almost 5 years old before she took the necessary steps to enroll in a program to be certified to teach.

In fact, the feeling of incompleteness takes very specific forms in all three participants. Gwen and Hillary had big careers in place and were very successful when they decided to become teachers. Gwen had an important finance job at a small town bank, and even though she liked it at first, she eventually realized that she was becoming bored. Incompleteness developed from that. She left the bank once, but they called her back. She returned only to find that she
was still bored. After visiting a school one day in connection with her job, she realized that she wanted to become a teacher, something she had thought about when she was in high school.

Hillary was very big in her job, too. She was the manager of a large number of sandwich shops, a position to which she had risen without a college degree. I’m sure she recalls it with some fondness, but after 17 years her enthusiasm ran out. She believed it was time for a change, but she got attracted to another food service career for another seven years. She had let fate decide by applying on the last day. However, she started to see limitations in the new job. When she and her husband had enough money for her to go to school, she decided to call this new career quits. She could not decide which would be a better way to fulfill her inspiration for science, nursing or teaching. Her brother-in-law convinced her to go into teaching, a decision that was confirmed by a community college science instructor. Her inspiration is connected to subject matter, and she believes that many things happen by fate. Therefore, in her mid-40s, she decided to earn her degree to become a teacher.

Gwen and Hillary knew it was time to make a change from their previous big careers. They both tried to leave, but were enticed back. They took for granted when they became teachers they would be totally competent, completely on top of all aspects in their class and in school, just like they were totally competent and completely on top of all aspects in their previous careers. Suzanne was completely different, though. She did not know what a full career was like. Nevertheless, she heard about the teacher education program and had faith that it would work out. She did not know what to expect like Gwen and Hillary did with a big, successful career. She did not start with that kind of mindset.
Moments of Awakening: I am Suppose to Teach

For some of the participants (Erin, Gwen, Lizbeth), there was something like significant moments of awakening where each of them thought they should become teachers. The idea to teach became intensely real to them at a specific moment, and this was the reality of what they were supposed to do. All three stopped what they were doing to follow their heart. They could not ignore it.

Erin, Gwen, and Lizbeth walked into a situation and realized teaching was for them. After several years of going back and forth between two jobs, Erin had a moment of awakening at the beginning of her new job as a substitute teacher’s aide. As soon as she walked into the school, she thought she had found her calling. It did not take long for her to make the decision to earn a degree in teacher education so she could have her own classroom someday. Gwen, too, experienced a moment of awakening when she walked into the school as part of her job for the bank. Prior to that, she did not know specifically what she wanted to do, but she knew she did not want to stay at the bank. The story that I shared in the portrait about how her mother-in-law by chance bought her a book that she needed for a college course, when she thought she was going to have to quit, confirmed to her that she should continue school so she could be certified to teach. Lizbeth had a goal of working for a while to save enough money so she could earn her master’s degree in history. But, she had a moment of awakening during her experience teaching with kids at the vocational center. Already having prior success in college, she took the necessary steps to enroll in the teacher education program at the same university where she earned her first degree, and within a matter of weeks, she was working on her second bachelor’s degree.
There was growing awareness in Suzanne. She gradually became aware and in order for her to be completely sure that she had to get the confidence by graduating with a bachelor’s degree. Her lack of confidence had held back the awareness that she really should be teaching. When she ran into a friend at the local library they talked about the teacher education program, and she went home and immediately called about it.

While teaching was not on Brandy’s horizon, I am not sure if I want to call her experience an awakening. She talked about how she was daydreaming about what to do with her life and the thought came to her that she should be a teacher. Some may call this a moment of awakening, while others may just say that she made the decision at that point. However, she is different than Erin, Gwen, and Lizbeth because she didn’t walk into that situation, she dreamed of it.

For Leah and Hillary, finding their path into teaching seems to be a level of wisdom that they experienced over time, which is different from a moment of awakening. Even though the seeds of becoming a teacher were planted many years earlier for Leah, it took some time for her to figure it out. In an email, she shared some thoughts with me. “I’m not a very religious person, but I believe that everything really does happen for a reason. Everything will work out in time, and you will find the reasons why they didn’t go as you had planned” (member checking).

**Teaching Not on Their Horizon**

For four of the participants (Erin, Paul, Lizbeth, Brandy), teaching was not on their horizon, and none of them had considered it as a viable career. They were opened up to it unexpectedly. It may be that Brandy and Erin, who came from low and low-middle SES classes, were only looking for jobs initially. Nonetheless, Erin, Paul, and Lizbeth were put in touch
accidentally because of some experience with teaching kids and realized it was for them.

Brandy, on the other hand, daydreamed about being a teacher and thought she would be good at it, but she had no experience with teaching kids. Therefore, for all four participants teaching was not on their agenda and was not at all considered a possibility. Lizbeth, though, is different from the other three participants because she had a goal in mind, but it was not teaching.

Erin did not know anything about education at first. When her son was a year old, she decided to go back to work. She would have taken any job, but she found one as a substitute teacher’s aide. For the next eight years, she moved from substitute teacher’s aide to permanent teacher’s aide and eventually earned her bachelor’s degree in elementary education. Before that job, she did not have a goal to teach. It was not on her horizon. Because of that experience with teaching kids she gained the confidence she needed to become a kindergarten teacher.

Paul didn’t have a career goal until he started substitute teaching, a job he did when he wasn’t busy working on the farm with his dad and other family members or coaching basketball. Although his coaching position got him thinking about teaching, a long-term teaching assignment for a junior high language arts teacher that confirmed the decision. All of his past diverse experiences make him the teacher he is today, especially to children that are going through similar situations.

Like Erin and Paul, Lizbeth’s motivation to teach came after she had an experience with teaching kids at a vocational center. Already having her bachelor’s degree in history, her goal was to make money so that she could earn her master’s degree. Even though she had been around kids age 8-16 as she coached cross-country and track since high school, she never thought about becoming a teacher, but the experience at the vocational center was different from
coaching. She liked teaching the content and helping the students with their class work. That
glimpse of teaching changed her plans.

Unlike the other three, Brandy did not decide to become a teacher from an experience
with teaching kids. She was inspired when she got quick insight while daydreaming in an
English literature class. The idea materialized at that moment. Today she attempts to make a
difference in the lives of her students, especially those who had a rough upbringing like the one
she experienced. I think she recognizes the tremendous impact she is having on the lives of her
students today.

Using Past Skills

While I somewhat expected to find most of the older participants to say they use many of
the skills from their previous careers in their classrooms every day, I was surprised to find that it
was such a strong extensive phenomenon. I found it in three of the older participants and in two
of the younger participants. Likewise, as I listened to many of the participants, both older and
younger, stories I could hear how their maturity from their past experiences carried over to their
classrooms today. Resta, Huling, and Rainwater (2001) pointed out, “Midcareer individuals
bring many strengths to teaching, including maturity, life experience, and good work habits” (p.
61). Many of the participants developed positive work ethics and know-how’s from work and/or
parenting experiences. Some had big careers in which they had to motivate employees, assess
their work, meet deadlines, and manage conflicts. Most of the older participants learned what
cooperation was from working as a team. For the participants with children, they have learned
how to identify with children and have learned the strengths, weaknesses, and interests of each of
their children. They also learned about time management and are familiar with what their
children are learning in school. They know what responsibility and dependability are all about, all maturity from earlier experiences that can transfer to their classrooms today.

Five participants (Hillary, Gwen, Suzanne, Brandy, Lizbeth) used past skills from their previous careers in one way or another in their teaching careers today. After 25 years as a manager in the food service industry, Hillary gained many skills that she uses to run her classroom and that she shares with her students as well. “There are things from business that I use every single day in my classroom ... setting up, organizing, and planning. I live by my calendar, and I am a planner. I share that with my students, as well. I would say that they learn from some of the things that I did. I share with them my life skills or my life experiences.” Like Hillary, Gwen had an important job, vice president of a small town bank, where she developed many different skills. She uses her math skills to teach middle school math today.

Even though Suzanne never intended to do anything with her business degree, she is pleased with the fact that she earned it. “I never thought I would knock the world off its feet in the business world, but I really think it is something that everybody needs to know. I think any job that I would get, it would be beneficial.” Her students are at an advantage from her having these skills. “I think a business degree is a very strong degree to have, in managing a household or a small business or whatever job you get, handling money, or what not. I don’t regret it for a minute. I use it almost every day when I teach because of a lot of economic principles and just general living comes out of business. It helps explain a lot of things to the kids” (follow-up interview #2, pp. 3-4).

Brandy uses her familiarity with the drug problem (remember she helped her mother get off drugs to start a meaningful life and wanted a “bumpy ride” when she got a teaching job) in her middle school classroom today. “I have had some real conversations with some of my
students who are already on drugs, their parents are on drugs. They’re in gangs and all this and that. I just snatch them up and close the door. I tell them you can get out. This is how. Look what you are doing” (see portrait, excerpt 3).

Taking the skills learned during her coursework while working on her bachelor’s degree in history has benefited Lizbeth today in her second grade classroom. “I can go deeper in detail and provide my students with information they may not get elsewhere concerning certain topics” (member checking #2).

Maturity

Maturity from experience shows up in almost all of the participants’ classrooms today. The maturity comes from many different areas, previous work, and life experiences or from being a parent. Even though Hillary worked in the food service industry for many years, she never really connected that career with science. “When I was at [the fast food restaurant], I spent a lot of time at the gym working out and I was always trying out one diet or another, trying to be healthy. The nutrition aspect of it was always trying to be a healthy person. I guess that is kind of a science, if you want to say science. I never thought of it as being science” (follow-up interview #2, p. 5). She did describe herself as once being a nutrition nut, and it has benefited her and her middle school science students today. “I’m very conscientious about what I eat. I go through phases where I exercise a lot and then life happens and then I don’t. But I talk with my students a lot about nutrition and being active. We’ve been talking about the cell and nutrition and how all that impacts us and spending too much time in the sun and what happens. Everything that I try and teach my students I try to relate it to something that means something to them (follow-up interview #2, p. 5). Also, since she had an important career managing people
and restaurants, she helps her students grow in the understanding and importance of having a good career. This, too, is another way of how she uses her maturity from her previous career.

Like Hillary, Gwen had a significant career, and she uses this experience when she talks with her middle school math students today. She sees good in everything she does, but believes there is always room for improvement. “I am going to be an excellent teacher. When I started this, I wanted to be the Illinois State Teacher of the Year. I’m not now. I’m kind of average. I think I’m not going to be Illinois State Teacher of the Year, but I am going to be a good teacher” (see portrait, excerpt 12). She has a feeling that math is the substance of society, because she was vice president of a small town bank, and she is very confident in her ability to teach. This is her maturity.

Suzanne remembers when she had no self-confidence. “I had a very dysfunctional childhood and very low self-esteem. I had an abusive father. I mean I just had no self-esteem whatsoever” (follow-up interview #2, p. 4). Maturity is shown in her process of becoming a middle school teacher. Now she wants to help her students who struggle with the same issues she once had. In fact, she clearly remembers what it was like for her academically when she was in middle school. “I struggled in junior high in reading, which I love, but, in junior high there would be conversations about stories or books that we’d read for class, and I would think that I read the wrong book because I would have no idea what they were talking about” (follow-up interview #2, p. 8). She also has other middle school experiences that are difficult for her to talk about. “I remember junior high was a nightmare. I was bullied. It was not good, which is why I think I love junior high [teaching it today] because I was so much of a loser. I totally get what it is like to be a junior high kid. I know that they are just people wanting to be cared about and somebody has to advocate for those who don’t have a voice for themselves, especially in that
awkward time” (follow-up interview #2, p. 7). She has now reached one of her goals in life, to teach middle school students.

Paul remembers when he was a lot like some of the middle school students he is teaching today. He never used to think of studying or about having an earnest career in the future. All he thought about was playing basketball and farming. He eventually realized that he needed a dependable career, so he could help support his wife and two children. Ultimately, he recognized that he could become a teacher and be a good role model for his students.

Not only does Brandy use her familiarity with the drug problem as a skill in her classroom today, but she also brings the maturity from it in, too. In fact, she told me about one of the reasons why she got into teaching. “I wanted to help kids who are in my situation because I had a really rough childhood with my mom’s addiction and extreme poverty” (see portrait, p. 1).

Six of the participants have children, each bringing maturity from that experience into their classrooms today. When Erin was a teacher’s aide, she used to watch the classroom teacher work with the students. She would then take what she observed home and try it out on her own son. She saw that she could make the same difference in her son that the classroom teacher made with her students. Gwen is a parent and spent a lot of time in the pool hall that her husband used to own years ago. “The kids that came into the pool hall were ... their parents didn’t even want them. I loved those kids. I could see such redeeming qualities” (see portrait, excerpt 3). When it came to returning to college, Paul had a plan, and it involved his family. “My wife wanted a teaching degree; too. She wanted to have another baby. It kind of worked out. She had a plan that we would go and do this and me do my student teaching and get the job, and then she would quit her job. She’d go back and do her student teaching” (follow-up
interview #1, p. 4). Brandy, Leah, and Suzanne also are parents, and all of them have been a single parent. Suzanne, who is still single, constantly mentioned being there for her kids during the interviews. Overall, I found that all of the participants with children want to be genuinely involved in their children’s lives and maturity from this experience is seen today in their teaching.

Larger Life Aspects

My conjecture at the beginning of this research was that these participants would stay in teaching longer than teachers who were traditional students. I found that to a significant extent this was the case, and it was connected with larger aspects of life. One specific sign is that several of them are thinking of doing a master’s degree. In fact, one participant has already completed hers, while two others have started and three are looking into programs.

Commitment to Teaching

As I listened to each of the participants’ stories, I could hear their commitment to teaching; generally, they plan to stay in the career until they retire. The primary motivations for many of them have to do with the students, be it interpersonal connections or the satisfaction from seeing improvements in their achievements. In some cases there were frustrations, but overall the satisfaction of the career surpassed any kind of dissatisfaction, and they overlooked whatever negativity they experienced. Additionally, two of the participants mentioned their desire to teach at the college level, but they want to do this while teaching in their classrooms during the day. Two other participants have other plans as soon as they retire. Whatever their reasons, all of them are committed to teaching for now, and could be in the classroom beyond many of their colleagues, staying until retirement.
Overwhelmingly, the participants reported being committed to teaching. Many discussed that they love what they teach, they are happy in their building, and they love the kids. Erin mentioned in the focus group, “I would love to stay in teaching. I’m happy where I’m at. I love what I do. I love the kids” (portrait, excerpt #4). When we met for the follow-up interview she expressed her commitment again. “I enjoy working with the kids. I’m getting to know their families, and I enjoy it. It’s just my niche” (portrait, excerpt #5). Suzanne is committed, too, but she doesn’t forget her age when she thinks about the time frame. “I’m not going to be teaching long term. Maybe 20 years, which doesn’t seem like that long now” (portrait, excerpt #10).

Paul and Gwen are committed to teaching, but they have plans for retirement. Paul hasn’t completely given up on the idea of farming. When I asked him if he was going to stay in teaching until he retired, he sounded torn between that and farming. “I think so. It’s for me. Retirement is the only thing. There will be plenty of ground to compensate for me in my retirement. I don’t know. It’s for me for now. It’s for me for the next 10 years for sure” (follow-up interview #2, p. 9; not in portrait). He continued about why he would leave the classroom in 10 years. “If my dad passes away or the farm pulls me back. I think that is the only thing that could take me out of education” (follow-up interview #2, p. 9; not in portrait). Gwen, like Paul, has plans after retirement. During the focus group she talked about how she’d like to be a children’s author when she retires. For now she is still committed to teaching. “I think I’ll stay in teaching until I write a children’s book. This is my progression after I retire in 20 years or so, then I’ll go into my next career of writing children’s books. I want to do that fulltime, but not right now. I’ll teach until I retire. I don’t think I could ever retire…I have too much to do. I just can’t relax. I love it. I love teaching. I love the kids, those big mouth junior high kids. I love them. The girls that are snotty, I mean, they have redeeming qualities about them that you
have to get to. I love them” (portrait, excerpt 13). When we met for the first follow-up interview, I asked her about being a children’s author again, and she talked about it and brought up other interests. “It isn’t something that I want to pursue now while I’m teaching. But, I would still like to do that. Did I mention evangelist, too? I want to do that, too. And I write songs. I have so many things that I want to do” (see portrait, page 14).

The other four participants (Lizbeth, Leah, Hillary, Brandy) expressed their desires to stay in teaching despite the frustrations. Lizbeth sounded pretty sure about staying when I asked her during the focus group. “I think so. I have my frustrations, but part of it is, um, since I have such a low academic class this year. But I really enjoy my class and what I teach” (see portrait excerpt #4). One year later, when I met with her for the follow-up interview and her answer hadn’t changed. In fact, she even sounded surer. “Definitely. I am really enjoying it” (follow-up interview #1, p. 6; not in portrait). So, why does she stay? She derives her satisfaction from seeing improvements in the achievements of the students. “I think I stay because of the kids. I enjoy seeing their growth throughout the year, so for me it is the kids, and even the ones who frustrate me, I enjoy seeing when they get something” (portrait, excerpt #4). When we met for the follow-up interview, she went on to explain. “As frustrating as it can be, because there is so much apathy from both parents and students, you know, you still have these kids where, for some of the kids, school is one of the few places where they were happy and felt safe. I always have a couple that if I could just take them home (laughing). I would just love to do that. I mean, that is one of the things I love; to be a positive influence for some of my students. It’s always just great to watch them blossom and grow each year. I love being able to explain something new to them and watch it click and find a new way to teach it if it didn’t” (follow-up interview #1, p. 6; not in portrait).
Leah communicated some past frustrations. “I really don’t have any frustrations. I’m pretty spoiled where I’m at. I did have a lot of frustrations last year [during her first year full-time ... remember she got hired in January], but I remember going home, and I loved what I did, regardless of all the frustrations. I’d be talking with my friends and they’d say, “I always hear that ... you’re so frustrated, but all you ever say is that you love your job. “ So, I’d still love what I was doing and not think that I’d want to be doing something else” (focus group, p. 7). So, why does she stay? “I guess the kids make me stay. But, I love the teaching part, actually” (focus group, p. 7; not in portrait). By the time we met for the follow-up interview, one year later, she talked more about why she thinks she’ll stay in teaching. “You know, I wake up, and I’m happy to go to my job. I enjoy it. It’s not like something that, oh, I got to go to work today. It’s something that I’m happy to go to” (follow-up interview #1, p. 5).

Hillary’s frustrations are a bit different. Maybe this has to do with her age. She is one of the “older” participants. “I guess what is frustrating for me lately is not being prepared for all this differentiation and RtI (Response to Intervention) that is coming across the system. I’m still trying to figure out how to make it through the day without having three different types of lesson plans for the different levels in the classroom” (portrait, p. 5). She also mentioned frustrations with some of the parents (portrait, excerpt #5), but she added, “I have these wonderful kids that I enjoy and you actually have relationships” (portrait, excerpt #5). Despite any frustrations, she reflects on why she’ll stay. I am kind of like all in it right now. It’s not an option not to be a teacher for me. I don’t think about not being a teacher. It’s just kind of what I do now. I don’t know. I’ve never thought about doing something else. This is it” (portrait, excerpt #6).

Brandy talked about why she stays in teaching, even though she gets upset with some of the teachers and administration. “It’s my students. I love them to death. The administration can
go crazy, do whatever they want. I’m going to close the door in my room” (portrait, p. 7).

Overall, all of the participants believed that going into teaching was a good career change. Teaching in public schools means you are constantly dealing with students, and they felt good about it.

**Master’s Degree**

All but two of the participants want to get their master’s degree. I think this shows their commitment even more. Most want it for external reasons, while others have more internal reasons. Brandy and Leah have both already begun working on their degrees, and Hillary recently graduated. Paul, Lizbeth, and Suzanne have plans of starting in the near future.

External reasons motivated Brandy and Leah to begin, but internal reasons make them want to go even further. Brandy’s district is paying for her first 15 credit hours, and she has already completed nine. But, she doesn’t want to stop with a master’s degree. “I’ll probably go on past that, too” (focus group, p. 11; not mentioned in the portrait). Leah has to pursue her master’s degree if she wants to stay in special education because her bachelor’s degree is in elementary education. She mentioned, in the focus group, that she has thought of earning her master’s plus 32.

Paul wants to earn his master’s degree, but his reasons stay more external. He figures he will make more money and that the district will be more apt to keep him if he has the degree. He has not started yet, but he has looked into some programs.

Lizbeth, Suzanne, and Hillary have more internal reasons for wanting to get their master’s degrees. It is part of making them feeling complete, and getting their master’s would make them feel even more complete. Lizbeth works with a few other teachers who would like to get into a master’s program together. They would be a support system for each other, offering
encouragement and motivation. Getting her master’s plus 32 is also something she would be interested in. If Suzanne were more financially set, she would begin her degree right away. Getting her masters in counseling would help her guide her students. Once she gets her degree, she has plans to teach at the community college in the evening to make more money. This would make it more of an external reason some day.

Hillary is a bit different from Lizbeth and Suzanne because she has an inspiration for science. I am not surprised that she has already graduated. She feels that she needs to keep up with the subject to be a good teacher. Besides, she has a love for academia and learning. She even plans to take more science courses, since that is what she teaches. She can eventually see herself, like Suzanne, teaching her middle school students during the day and teaching science or education courses at the community college at night. These participants have clearly defined goals and positive self-images that are likely to make their desires come true.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the phenomenon of second year teachers, who came to be second-year teachers without going through the traditional route, to understand how they became teachers, and to see whether they are likely to stay in teaching. This understanding was carefully developed through their stories as they shared their own experiences and feelings. As it stands, this study offers a perspective on the characteristics of this population. Conducting this study gave me an in-depth look into eight participants’ pathways from childhood until where they are today as teachers.

In this chapter, I review the major findings of the study, followed by suggestions for future research and suggestions for how this study might be used.

Major Findings

Perhaps, the most important finding is the way in which these nontraditional students turn out to be committed to teaching. It is easy to see that they enjoy working with their students and that they enjoy their work as a teacher. Whether their students are eager to learn or understand the material or not, these teachers enjoy teaching all of them. Of course, nothing makes them happier than when they see the change in their students or when they help them understand a real life situation. They know that teaching is more than just teaching the curriculum, they want their students to experience success in school and to be contributing members of society. Therefore, they are concerned with not just their intellectual development, but also their total development, which includes their character. They get rewards from the smiles and comments that their students make. This makes them feel that they are contributing to the development of their character and personality.
These teachers also are committed to investing their time and energy into more education to become better teachers. Many have begun working on their master’s degree to bring new ideas into their classrooms. While some may want to reap the financial rewards that come from getting a master’s degree, they still communicate energy and enthusiasm for maintaining ongoing professional learning to benefit their students. Even though this group of teachers considers their career to be demanding, they are committed to the profession.

Another major finding is how many of the participants use past skills and maturity from earlier experiences in their classrooms today. This is my impression from the interviews - not based on observation from the classroom. Many of the participants have content related skills that they now use to manage their classrooms and deliver their subject area of interest to their students. They provide real life connections and foster critical thinking. They were already mature, responsible people in their previous jobs and life. Therefore, their students see a public person carrying responsibility from previous experiences into their teaching careers. This might be their first chance of dealing with a person like this. Furthermore, 6 out of 8 participants have children. These teachers are familiar with children as well as what takes place in the schools.

The last major finding is that there was a significant proportion (4 out of 8) for whom teaching was not on the horizon, but they found teaching accidentally. They are happy where they are and do not want to go anywhere else. They are using their past work experiences as a comparison and believe that those jobs do not match with teaching. Teaching just fits them. They have found that they enjoy working with students and it gives them a chance to be lifelong learners. Even if they are not planning on pursuing a master’s degree, they still learn from their students and the career. The school atmosphere brings them deeper satisfaction.
Future Research

Based on the findings of this dissertation study, I would like to make several recommendations for future research. First, it turned out by looking at these participants’ present jobs that five out of the eight participants are teaching in a school in small towns. The other three participants are teaching in middle size towns. When I first started the study, I did not know that this would be the case. The sample only addressed a special subpopulation of all students, mainly of students who taught in such towns. I am dealing with only one site, one program at one university. All of the participants came from the surrounding community. None of them got certified to teach in another state and came here to teach. Even though this is a limitation to my study, having these teachers with previous career experience can give county students something to be exposed. One suggestion is to replicate the study at a site that represents very different size settings. For example, conducting this at an inner city, wealthy or poor suburb, or large metropolitan area could prove revealing.

Second, the present study found that the participants believe that they are going to stay in teaching. As an extension of this study, it would be worthwhile to interview several teachers who are close to retirement or who have taught for maybe 10 years and from the same area, who were also nontraditional students who got their teaching certificate after years of being in another career, to see if they have been pleased with their career switch, particularly if they too thought years ago that they would stay. Therefore, I would want to continue the same sample. It could show if this is true with other teachers. Retrospective interviews that explore their story of why they made the change and when had they initially thought about being a teacher would help and encourage nontraditional students to seek a teaching certificate.
Finally, we definitely need a more in-depth understanding of why 50% of teachers are leaving the teaching profession after the first 5 years. There was enough dissatisfaction to leave teaching, so it would be valuable to research which careers they go turn to and find satisfaction. Interviews with this population, developed into portraits, could prove crucial to the larger perspective on life on the society, giving better insights into many of the factors surrounding why teachers leave. This research might be possible through a survey or fixed question interviews.

**Implications**

This study looked at second-year teachers who were nontraditional students when they were working towards their education degree. Because many have had previous careers and have raised children, these nontraditional students are different from the traditional students coming right out of high school. The results of this study would be helpful primarily to two audiences: first to teacher education programs and second to school districts looking to hire teachers.

What does this study mean for teacher education programs? If the nontraditional student is becoming widespread, then teacher education programs need to build their programs around that. Nontraditional students have taken a variety of paths that led them to the program and have done many interesting things since high school. As this study found, many of the participants use past skills and maturity from earlier experiences in their classrooms today. This needs to be acknowledged. As an instructor, I know that classroom discussion can be enlivened by their participation because they have real-world experiences. Many of them want to share their story and are happy to be in college in spite of any challenges. They are motivated to learn and have high expectations. Instructors should keep their standards for the traditional students, but take into account the assignments, delivery methods, and class content to this population. When it is
time to place them in schools for internships and student teaching, the placement coordinator should be aware of their status. Nontraditional students with content skills and those who are used to taking responsibility may expect a little more from their program when it comes to placement. The placement coordinator may want to spend some time getting to know the students before deciding which teachers to place them with. For example, several of the participants felt that their cooperating teachers, who had been teaching for around 25 or 30 years, were set in their ways. The placement coordinator may want to be sensitive to this fact. On the other hand, some participants are happy to be teaching as a career, over what they were previously doing, and they may not expect any special treatment.

This study also found that the participants are committed to teaching. They plan on teaching until they retire. Many are interested in earning their master’s degree, which shows an even bigger commitment. Nontraditional students might be interested in professional organizations and conferences that will benefit them as teachers. Another point, though minor, teacher education programs need to be aware that even though many nontraditional students return to school with content area skills from their previous experiences, some may need a refresher in some areas. For example, Hillary mentioned, “When I took my placement test I had to take all of these classes that didn’t even count, but I breezed right through them” (follow-up interview #2, p. 8).

Second, this study would aid school districts as they look to fill positions in their schools. Administrators, like teacher education programs, should also consider the past skills and maturity that this population brings into the classroom from their earlier experiences. Many have experienced a lot of success. Either way, they can provide students with examples from the real
world that will be applicable to the classroom. It is hoped they have greater maturity from their previous jobs and life experiences. All of this can make them a good addition to their school.

Administrators might want to consider that nontraditional applicants may have special commitments. They are committed to adding value to the school as soon as they arrive. Administrators could even consider how the hiring process affects a new teacher’s likelihood of being satisfied and remaining. Lui (2004) suggested that administrators give the candidate an accurate picture of what the work and the school is like. The candidate can then choose a school that best matches their needs and be satisfied. Remembering that this is a very specialized sample, with the participants teaching in small and mid-size towns, findings may be different where teachers are teaching in larger communities.
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