

Career Switchers: Teaching in K-8

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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” [1] to understand the participants’ stories. The primary data source was focus groups and one to three one-on-one follow-up interviews with nine participants who were second-year nontraditional elementary or middle school teachers. Each participant entered the profession by the same program, and all of the participants came from the same site. Their ages ranged between 22 and 45 years. The researcher [2] developed eight portraits of participants who talked about their career progression. These portraits yielded three major findings. First, the participants revealed their commitment to teaching, generally planning to stay in the career until they retired. Another major aspect in the portraits was that many of the participants used their earlier life experience and maturity in their classrooms. The last major finding revealed that a significant proportion of teachers found the profession by accident. 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 placing teachers in schools for internships and student teaching, the 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.

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. 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 had 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 [3]. I wanted to hear when these teachers first thought about becoming a teacher and why they are sure that teaching is right for them.

2. Statement of Problem

Every profession expects some turnover as employees leave to retire, pursue other careers, or for other various reasons. According to Ingersoll [4], “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).”

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. Erlandson [5] 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. Lee [6] 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.

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. This study focuses 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.

3. 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 licensed to teach through an adult comprehensive education program held in a Midwestern, private university.

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?

4. Review of Literature

Two studies, Erlandson [5] and Lee [6], are the most relevant to my research. Both are qualitative, personal, and involve case studies.

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. First, 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.

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.

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. 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.

5. Methodology

My research design evolved from the 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 [7].

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.

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.

Lawrence-Lightfoot [8] developed the concept of "portraiture," a phrase used for a method of inquiry and documentation in the social sciences. Using these experiences, she, as a sociologist, wanted to develop "portraits" of others in "words. Both in conducting interviews and in constructing portraits, I used the essentialist approach. Witz [9] 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).

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. 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. 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.

In analyzing the data, I transcribed the dialogue from the focus groups to get a perspective on each participant's story. From the nine participants, I chose eight 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.

6. Cross-Case Discussion

The overall discussion 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?"

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. 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 discussion.

Four of the participants (Suzanne, Gwen, Paul, Lizbeth) entered the program with bachelor degrees. Everybody, except Lizbeth, chose not to earn a second degree. 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.

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.

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.

The other five participants (Brandy, Paul, Gwen, Leah, Lizbeth) heard either their parents or some other relative emphasize the importance of a college education. They 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

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. 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 licensed to teach.

In fact, the feeling of incompleteness take 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. 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.

9. Moments of Awakening: I am Supposed 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. All three stopped what they were doing to follow their heart.

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. 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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

10. 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.

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.

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.

11. Using Past Skills and Maturity from Earlier Experiences

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 [10] 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.

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. 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" (follow-up interview #2, pp. 3-4).

Brandy uses her familiarity with the drug problem 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 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.

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.

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). Now she wants to help her students who struggle with the same issues she once had.

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.

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” (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.

12. 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.

13. 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.

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). 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.

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. 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).

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 ... she got hired in January], but I remember going home, and I loved what I did, regardless of all the frustrations” (focus group, p. 7).

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.

14. 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. 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.

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.

Lizbeth, Suzanne, and Hillary have more internal reasons for wanting to get their master's degrees. It is part of making them feeling complete. Lizbeth works with a few other teachers who would like to get into a master's program together. If Suzanne were more financially set, she would begin her degree right away. Getting her master's 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. 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 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.

15. 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.

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 on-going 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.

16. References

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