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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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# Non-Traditional Entrants to the Profession of Teaching: Motivations and Experiences of Second-Career Educators

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Non-Traditional Entrants to the Profession of Teaching:  
Motivations and Experiences of Second-Career Educators

**Divergent Routes to the Profession of Education**

The traditional path to a teaching career has involved entering the classroom immediately after graduating from college. Most teachers begin teaching careers in their early twenties. However, the demographics of new teachers are changing. Only about half of those who have become teachers in recent years have done so immediately upon graduating from college, with an almost equal number of second-career teachers filling the nation's classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). There is a need for more research on this population of non-traditional entrants to the teaching profession, especially those who have had prior professional careers. These "career switchers" are part of a larger trend, both nationally and globally, of professionals changing careers mid-stream (Valcour & Tolbert, 2003). Any number of factors may cause this potentially life-changing event to be set into motion, including a desire for fulfillment, more family and leisure time, and opportunities to serve the community (Chope, 2001).

This article attempts to study these dynamics and seeks to examine the motivations and experiences of non-traditional, second-career teachers. It is organized as follows: Part One examines the state of new entrants to education in light of the critical national shortage of educators. A thorough review of the relevant literature in Part Two describes the growing phenomenon of career-switchers to education. Part Three is an analysis of the trends in the literature. Finally, Part Four recommends practical ideas to school administrators, career programs for teacher education, and for potential second-career teachers.

**Critical Need for Teachers in Twenty-first Century Schools**

The demand for highly qualified teachers in accordance with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), coupled with the dual problems of increasing student enrollment and high

teacher attrition rates (Croasman, Hampton, & Herrman 1997; National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; National Education Association., 2003), has created a school staffing crisis. As the baby boom generation begins to retire, an increased focus has been placed on the problem of replacing these experienced teachers. However, teaching has long been a profession with a problematic attrition rate. A number of factors contribute to the trend of teachers who leave the classroom within the first three years, which has been reported as high as 30% of new hires (Darling-Hammond, 2001). Inadequate teacher education, poor salary, a lack of mentoring, a sink-or-swim mentality which often finds new teachers with the most difficult teaching assignments, and burdensome administrative tasks are leading contributors to teacher burnout and attrition, among other problems (Darling-Hammond, 2001). Teacher attrition places a tremendous financial burden on often cash-strapped districts. One study found new teacher attrition as high as 40% within the first three years of service at a cost of \$329 million per year to the state annually (Luekens, Lyler, & Fox, 2004), while other reports placed the national cost as high as \$2.2 billion annually (Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2008). To make matters worse, a plethora of confusing, and often competing, state teacher certification requirements may serve to discourage many potential teachers from entering the field.

Others argued that the root of the problem does not involve the supply of teachers or money. According to Ingersoll and Smith (2003), the convergent problems of student discipline, the lack of administrative support, poor student motivation, and the absence of teacher involvement in the school decision-making process are problems that must first be addressed and remedied before any substantive change takes place in the nation's schools with regards to attrition. The problem of attrition, the authors contended, may have a harmful effect on the overall school climate. Croasman, et al. (1997) argued that the extraordinary demands placed on

first-year teachers have also contributed to the washout rate. These young teachers are often given the worst of assignments and, in some cases, left to sink or swim entirely on their own, unlike in some other professions that have lengthy apprenticeship periods.

Although most agreed that the national focus on placing so-called “highly qualified” teachers in every classroom is theoretically sound, it has created a bureaucratic conundrum with volumes of rules and regulations, as well as many less than clear guidelines allowing for vastly divergent interpretations (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006). In this climate, a number of non-traditional programs have emerged and seek individuals who wish to enter the teaching profession after switching careers from a previous line of work. Second-career teachers offer real-life work experiences that would prove useful to the traditional teacher who enters the profession immediately after college. And, informal mentors could help to keep the traditional novice teacher to find job satisfaction and eliminate the “grass is greener” mentality that many young people develop in their first jobs.

### **The Remarkable Phenomenon of Career-Switchers into Teaching**

The occurrence of widespread career switching is a relatively new phenomenon among working professionals. In the past, a career was likely to be characterized by an employee seeking to stay with one, perhaps two companies for the duration of one’s working life. Leading theorists from the 1950s through the 1970s continued to support this traditional understanding of career (Levinson, 1978; Super, 1957). By contrast, recent trends indicate the prevalence of the so-called “boundaryless career,” where one may change jobs, or even professions, many times over the course of a working lifetime (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Some have argued that the very nature of work has changed in modern society due to a number of factors, including technology, globalism, and economics (Chope, 2001; Sullivan & Emerson, 2003). These factors

necessitate the emergence of the career-switching worker who has traded the “company man” mentality of the past for the free-agent approach of the present. Conversely, Valcour and Tolbert (2003) found that boundaryless careers tended to work well for women, due to a number of factors including time off for child-bearing and raising, and moving due to a spouse’s career. The study also found that these types of career paths do not serve men well and that men are more likely to stay with one company, seeking promotions within an organization. It is also important to note that little research has been done to look at the effects of the changing nature of careers upon minority populations (Sullivan, 1999).

Some of the current pool of career-changers are looking for work that may be more fulfilling and personally satisfying than their original choice of profession. Jung (1933) believed that a mid-life crossroads was common for the worker, and at this point one would choose to change careers toward a profession that mirrors one’s belief systems and personal goals. Holland’s (1972) groundbreaking work on the nature of careers stated that people gravitate toward types of work that are compatible with their personalities and are more satisfied once they have settled in such a job, becoming far less likely to switch careers in the future. This theory provides a possible explanation for those second-career teachers who have given up what are often well-paying professions to seek a career more in line with personality traits and value systems. However, Thomas and Robbins (1979) asserted that those who moved into what they labeled as congruent careers were no more likely to remain in those careers after five years than those in non-congruent careers. Certainly, there are implications for the second-career teacher who enters the profession believing it to be more in line with his or her personality. Thomas and Robbins speculated that one’s profession holds less importance after a

mid-point in life and that changes in profession are just as likely to be influenced by the need for more leisure time as it is by a need for an alignment of profession with values and beliefs.

Just as there are different reasons for career switching, there are also different results. Not all adults experience a seamless transition from one career to another, even if the second career is something that the career changer has always dreamed about doing. Lewis (1996) pointed out the obstacles faced by many older career changers in the quest to pursue a second career, including considerable investment of time and money as they prepare for a new profession. By contrast, younger career changers often suffer from negative self-images and a lack of information “not only on occupations, but also within their own interests and skills” (Lucas, 1999, p. 117). Nevertheless, people of all ages and backgrounds continue to make dramatic changes in their professional lives in spite of the obvious challenges and hardships.

### **Significance for the Profession of Education**

There is much to gain from scholarly investigation of individuals who choose teaching as a second profession. For example, there are advantages a mature, non-traditional teaching applicant retains over the recent college-aged graduate who enters the profession. Investigating this population provides data useful for teacher education programs, as they seek to provide learning experiences designed to best train these unique educators by emphasizing the value of prior work experiences in the preparation process. In addition, school administrators may find the results useful in recognizing the strengths of this population of teachers, which is clearly different from the traditional entrant to the teaching profession. Finally, this study may be useful to second-career teachers themselves as they realize there is value in prior work experiences along with common experiences shared by those who have chosen teaching as a second career. Potential second-career teachers may gain insight into the struggles encountered by the novice,

as well as how the experienced second-career teacher has been able to weave prior work experiences into teaching.

Second-career teachers often have vastly different experiences rooted in many other professions (Brady, 1997; Wolpert-Gawron, 2008). This variety of backgrounds adds to the richness and practicality of educational institutions in a field often criticized as being outside the “real world.” These teachers may have a unique set of experiences that allows them to either adjust more easily (or have more difficulty adapting) to the demands of the teaching profession. There may also be common or shared experiences that could provide valuable information to the researcher and the educational community at-large. These teachers may be able to provide valuable insight for those aspiring teachers who are entering the field from a prior career, as well to principals and other administrators seeking to provide their schools’ classrooms with highly qualified teachers, as per the provisions of NCLB. Career changers often bring a lifetime of knowledge and work experience that may have a profound effect on themselves, their colleagues, and their students. It is plausible that an older beginning teacher, with diverse work experiences, may have a stronger appreciation of the profession. In some cases, these older novice teachers have raised families and have considerable experience dealing with children prior to serving as a teacher.

Career changers who have chosen teaching as a second career have a great deal to offer the profession and provide much that is worthy of scholarly investigation. The results of this investigation may provide valuable information that could benefit both future teachers entering from a prior profession and principals and school districts seeking to hire these individuals.

## **A Review of the Literature**

For some time now, the public has heard the alarm sounded that the nation faces a teacher shortage. An estimated two and a half million new teachers are needed to fill the nation's classrooms (Luekens, Lyler, & Fox, 2004). As a result, some college graduates seeking to change professions have considered teaching as a second career. Many colleges and universities now offer non-traditional, post-baccalaureate certificate programs or Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) degree programs that allow candidates to acquire initial teacher certification. Khadaroo (2008) cited the fact that "many alternative pathways into teaching have cropped up over the past 25 years. Nearly 20% of new teachers were certified through alternative routes in 2005" (p. 2). The increased prevalence of quality on-line degree programs is also allowing many prospective second-career teachers to pursue certification without disrupting their lives and sacrificing their incomes in the interim.

Second-career teachers are different from most new college graduates. As Resta, Huling, and Rainwater (2001) pointed out, "midcareer individuals bring many strengths to teaching, including maturity, life experience, and good work habits" (p. 61). The retention rate for these teachers is also much better than that of their counterparts. Rather than gain these attributes, as most traditional teachers do in the first difficult year of teaching in their first job, these career changers are ready for the task. Many of these teachers are eager to utilize what they have learned in prior careers and teach the values of democracy in their classrooms (Unterreiner, 2006).

Most teacher candidates who seek to enter the teaching profession as a mid-career transition choose to do so by way of non-traditional teacher education programs. These non-traditional programs can focus purely upon preparing career changers to apply what they already



know to a new situation. Some of these career changers give up professions that pay considerably better and have more benefits than teaching does (Peske, Liu, Johnson, Kauffman, & Kardos, 2001). There are also suggestions that employers draw upon the paraprofessional ranks for new, but experienced, teaching candidates. In fact, a number of school districts are working in conjunction with teacher education departments to create flexible certification programs in order to prepare these potential teachers (Villegas & Clewell, 2001). Conversely, other districts are collaborating with local colleges to ensure that quality mentoring and residency programs are in place, especially in hard-to-staff urban schools (Chin, 2004; Hueser & Owens, 1999; Keller, 2006). Such programs help to guarantee not only that better and more diverse teacher candidates enter the classroom, but also increases the likelihood that they will stay. These measures become imperative in high turnover schools, which are more likely to hire inexperienced teachers.

### **Teaching as a Second Career**

According to one new study, the reasons that people are changing careers in order to become teachers can be reduced to three influencing factors, including the opportunity to do something personally satisfying, make a contribution to society, and have a career that allows time for family responsibilities (The Pool of Potential Second-Career Teachers, 2008). Others speak of a sense of calling which is deep and meaningful, and sometimes religious. This calling is stronger than the general perception that teaching is a difficult and demanding profession that holds a lowly status in modern society (Richardson & Watt, 2005).

Among the ranks of second-career teachers are people who are leaving often lucrative and high profile jobs to enter teaching, as well as those who come from blue-collar backgrounds. These are most often people who have “strong ties to the community, own property, may have

families, and are less likely to relocate” (Haggard, Slostad, & Winterton, 2006, p. 46). They are as equally diverse as any set of traditional age students entering teaching, but they can be categorized. Crow, Levine, & Nager (1990) identify three groups of career changers who have chosen to become teachers:

- The “Homecomers,” or those for whom going back to school to become a teacher is like going home. These career-switchers admit that teaching is something that they have always wanted to do.
- The “Converted,” or those who began to consider seriously teaching after a crucial event, or series of events, led them to a change. These events could be family, health, or financial, among others, and served as a catalyst for career change.
- The “Unconverted,” who have been drawn to teaching, but have become disinterested or discouraged by the profession. A number of factors may have caused the change of heart, including a negative experience with methods classes or student teaching. They feel a connection to the education profession, but will not likely find themselves as teachers in the classroom.

### **Motivation of Career-Switchers to Teach**

A recent study by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation (2008) found in a nationwide survey of almost 2,300 adults aged 24 to 60, 42% would consider teaching as a second career. This number is substantial in spite of the problems with the profession that have been highlighted by the news media over recent decades.

Second-career teachers share some of the motivating factors that lead traditional-age students to choose education as a future career, as well as different and unique factors that set them apart. Snyder (1995) surveyed 3,000 pre-service teachers, including significant numbers of

career switchers, and found that most were interested in the profession because of an interest in and a love for young people. Concerning older students seeking teaching as a second career, most had the benefit of children of their own and saw “teaching as an end in itself, rather than as a means to some other professional end” (p. 9). Bray (1995) added that those with degrees in engineering and science, as well as those with graduate degrees, were increasingly becoming interested in teaching as a second career. This, of course, is good news considering the current shortages in science and math fields and the prevalence of out-of-field teachers in these areas (NCES, 2005).

Altruism is also a consideration when seeking to understand the motivations of a non-traditional entrant into the field of education (Theriot, 2007). The concept of putting others before oneself is a common trait among these teachers, according to Serow (1993). He divided second-career teachers into four distinct groups: *extenders*, or those who view teaching as an extension of pre-existing beliefs; *subject-oriented*, or those who are primarily interested in a specific teaching discipline; *practical*, or those who seek the field because of a natural attraction to teaching, and; *rectifiers*, or those who are seeking to correct a previous career choice incompatible with core beliefs and/or goals. A common thread running through the majority of these teachers is the desire to work with young people. Although there are many characteristics of second-career teachers that make them unique, this desire to work with young people is shared with traditional-aged teachers. Manuel and Hughes (2006) found that traditional-aged pre-service teachers sought teaching out of idealism, more than a love of subject matter. They also pointed out that this younger generation of teachers did not expect to be teaching in ten years. In light of this data, it becomes imperative to tap into the pool of second-career teachers as a resource for filling the nation’s classrooms with quality teachers who intend to stay.

## **Influential Factors for Second-Careers toward Teaching**

Second-career teachers also differ from traditional age entrants in the area of influential factors leading to teaching. For example, traditional age pre-service teachers are often strongly influenced by a former teacher or by those in the family who are teachers. By contrast, second-career teachers are more likely to be influenced by value systems and other intrinsic motivators, as well as by prior work experiences. Powell (1992) asserted

Nontraditional preservice teachers were an older group of students, had encountered many life experiences, and most were deeply committed to becoming teachers, especially those who had chosen teaching over lucrative careers that they had been in for a number of years. (p. 235)

In addition, many of these teachers had extensive experience with children, most of them having raised children of their own. Other studies show additional factors also contribute to the decisions of career-switchers that choose to become teachers. Richardson and Watt (2005) found that a desire for security, more time with family, and a sense of calling were significant reasons why non-traditional teachers were leaving their jobs and steady incomes in order to prepare to become a teacher. They went on to indicate that these teachers were realistic and prepared for the demands of the job and were not dissuaded by the perceived lowly status of the profession.

By contrast, Novak and Knowles (1992) asserted that second-career teachers were as overwhelmed by the realities of the classroom as traditional-age first-year teachers were. The authors contended that the subjects in their study had erroneously believed that prior, but unrelated, work experience would immediately transfer to the classroom and it did not. These teachers, according to the authors, need mentoring and adjustment time just like other novice teachers. These new teachers were able to incorporate prior experiences into their classrooms,

however, after an appropriate amount of time settling into their jobs. The study points out the need for teacher education programs to teach these students how to tap these prior experiences.

### **Teacher Education Preparation Programs and Career-Switchers**

Some researchers suggest the need for change in teacher education programs in order to attract career changers (Harrell & Harris, 2006; Suell & Piotrowski, 2007). Others call for changes to teacher education programs to be adapted to the specific needs of older, work-experienced career switchers, including a challenging and accelerated curriculum (Tigchelaar, Brouwer, & Korthagen, 2008). These older candidates, who enter graduate school already with a lifetime of diverse experience, need programs tailored to them as students who are very different from traditional-aged college students. One such program has incorporated a yearlong internship as part of a distinctive M.A.T. degree program where the focus is upon preparing these unique teaching candidates, rather than just training them (Morton, Williams & Brindley, 2005). Another program offers an intense course of study and fieldwork that is short in duration and features immersion in local schools over the course of the entire program. Interns felt that programs such as this not only well prepared them for the demands of the classroom, but also recognized the demands placed on personal finances and relationships as a result of choosing to change careers to pursue teacher certification (Lerner & Zittelman, 2002). Scanell (1999) studied several different approaches to teacher education, determining that there is no best model. There are, however, characteristics common to quality programs across the spectrum. How and to what degree these programs are able to meet the needs of second-career teachers will be factors in determining how long these valuable additions to the workforce will remain as teachers.

In addition to M.A.T. and post-baccalaureate programs that require a considerable time commitment for attending classes on campus, many viable alternatives have surfaced offering regionally accredited, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) approved online programs that allow the aspiring second-career teachers to complete most of the coursework, aside from student teaching, in the comforts of their own homes and offices (Guernsey, 2005). These programs continue to be especially attractive to second-career teachers because of the flexible nature of the coursework. A business professional who works late or unconventional hours, for example, can log onto the respective college or university at his/her convenience and work toward a teaching degree. Guernsey pointed out that the long-term quality of these programs has yet to be assessed, but what is clear is that technology has created a new avenue for those who have desired to change careers in order to become a teacher. These individuals might have been discouraged from doing so otherwise, yet have now been empowered to pursue their dreams.

In a study of second-career pre-service science teachers, Bohning, Hale, & Chowning, (1999) found that these teachers were anxious about the content to be taught more than concerns over learning to teach. The authors theorized that these teachers had been able to develop beyond the concerns common to most pre-service teachers much earlier than traditional candidates. Konecki, Pottorff, King, Lin, Armstrong, & Pryor (2002) developed a model program for career changers seeking entry into the teaching profession. This program is intense, short in duration, and has its students immersed in local schools from the beginning of their course of study. Interns of this program reported that they feel better prepared because of this format, but also recognized the strain that the program, and changing careers in general, has placed on personal finances and relationships. This program attempts to meet the needs of this unique demographic

of teachers, which is what many researchers have found lacking in most non-traditional teacher preparation programs. Morton, et al. (2005) discussed another model program (M.A.T.) for second-career teachers which emphasized four core strands of great use for any teacher: understanding children, teaching content, assessment, and reflective practice.

This program also has the unique feature of a yearlong internship that includes preplanning and post-planning. The rationale behind this lengthy requirement is that total immersion in school culture better prepares teachers to enter the profession. Several insights were gained during the pilot year of this program, including the following: some teacher resistance to the presence of these M.A.T. interns in their respective schools; the expectation by some faculty that because these interns were older they should be experienced with children; and unrealistic expectations on the part of the interns toward school culture. Many were surprised at the demanding nature of the job, but adapted quickly and reported, “many principals viewed the interns as more qualified and self-confident than their substitute teachers and wanted to use the MAT interns as substitutes” (Morton, et al., 2005, p. 201).

### **Teacher Education Initiatives for Career-Switchers**

An emerging theme among much of the literature is the need to attract older and diverse candidates into teacher education programs while retooling these programs to meet the needs of these potential teachers (Reichardt, 2001; Shroeder, 2002). Clearly, there are concerns that are unique to this group of teachers that are different from their younger counterparts, such as balancing current work schedules with school and meeting the demands of family responsibilities. Bray (1995) looked at the perceptions of three groups of students as they cycled through a traditional teacher education program: traditional college students; older, returning students; and career-switchers. This study found that there is a need for individualization in

teacher education programs that would allow some customization to meet the needs of non-traditional students, including a re-design of the typical student teaching experience. The author called for the development of an individualized education plan, or IEP, for non-traditional students. This term is often politically charged because of its use with special education students and its association with justifications for the use of federal money; as such, the term should probably be renamed. Nevertheless, the point is well made that non-traditional students are different from the typical college student and better served by a program that recognizes this fact.

There are some concerted efforts underway by state governments and boards of regents to attract older students into the teaching field. The state of Georgia, for example, published a report of a three-phase plan to encourage diversity among teacher education candidates, including recruiting career-changers into the programs (Board of Regents, 2005). The study found that by offering incentives, such as flexible scheduling of courses and increased collaboration with local school districts, a 23% increase in teacher education candidates resulted in the first year, including 113 career changers and 100 paraprofessionals. The long-term goals of this project are to “reduce the number of teachers who leave the profession by one-third, and to put a highly qualified teacher in every public school classroom” (p.12). This commitment to the profession indicates a major policy shift from the traditional methods of attracting teacher education candidates.

### **Career-Switchers Transition to the Classroom**

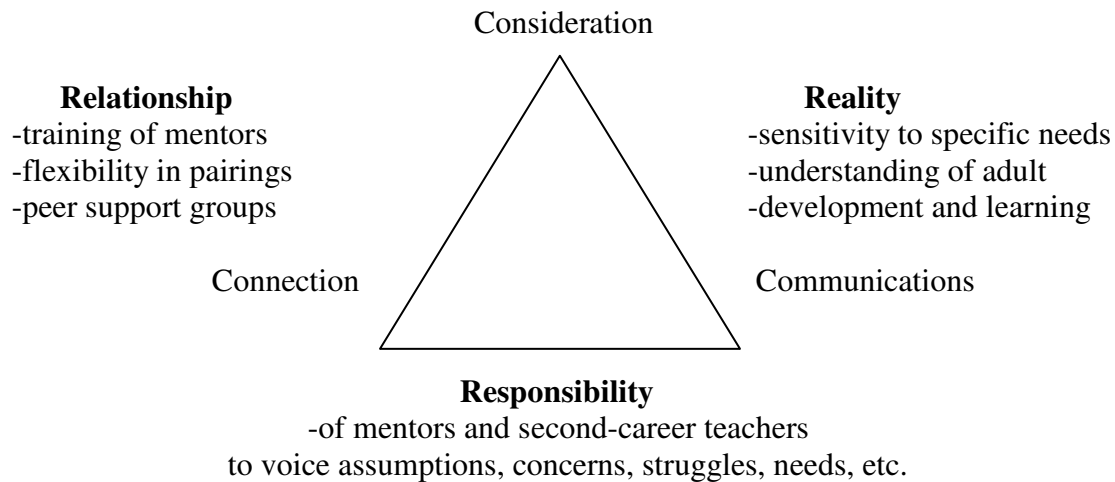
In moving beyond preparation, some teachers note the transition is not as smooth as they anticipated (Bulloch & Knowles, 1990) and teaching is more difficult than expected. In fact, many second-career perceptions of the teaching profession and of themselves as teachers alter after some time in the classroom (Freidus & Krasnow, 1991).



Teaching has traditionally been a relatively lonely profession, with teachers closing the door of their classrooms and often having little time to interact with peers. Yet, collegiality is of special importance to second-career teachers, many of whom enter the teaching profession from the business world with its work teams and collaborative projects. Roy (2002) emphasized the importance of developing cohorts of colleagues as these second-career teachers transition from college to the classroom. The author also encouraged the maintenance of online communities in which new entrants to the teaching profession can stay in contact with other second-career teachers to share frustrations, victories, advice, and other messages of support. The opportunity to establish peer support networks benefits novice second-career teachers immensely and eases the transition into a new work setting, complete with its own unique culture and norms. Surely, those who have had prior careers can adapt to a new job, but the added help of an established virtual community would make the transition a less lonely endeavor.

Beyond peer networks, other mechanisms can be put into place to aid the second-career novice teacher. Mayotte (2001) called for a three-pronged support system for novice second-career teachers to take into account effective mentoring, characteristics of second-career teachers, and adult development theory. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Triangular Support Model for Novice Second-Career Teachers



### The Role of Gender and Age in Choosing Teaching as a Second Career

Several interesting studies have considered the role of gender in the selection of teaching as a second career. Both men and women who had originally rejected teaching considered the major as an easy path to a college degree, a career for the non-ambitious (Lerner & Zittleman, 2002). Freidus (1989) examined the degree to which gender plays a role in the decision of career-switchers choosing education. Feminists, who often reject the traditional roles of women in society, are deciding on their own accord that teaching is more compatible with their changing lifestyles, certainly those with children. In a follow-up study (1990), Freidus conducted case studies of four second-career teachers (two male, two female) with specific emphasis upon gender roles and societal expectations. The study found a worldview constructed in early years, while still living at home, had a profound impact upon career decisions and later, the decision to change careers.

Increasingly, college graduates are looking to the field of teaching as a viable career alternative. Some have decided to turn their backs on the corporate world and look for a career with meaning (Brady, 1997). Even later in life, some who have been quite successful in other

careers, having earned recognition and handsome salaries, desire to impact society in professions such as nursing, teaching, and fire-fighting. Gender and age seem to be less important when determining the reasons why those with established careers choose to become teachers.

### **Former Military and Second Careers in Teaching**

Perhaps one of the most significant efforts over the past twenty years to recruit experienced non-traditional entrants into the teaching ranks has been the *Troops for Teachers* initiative, a U.S. government sponsored venture that provides a stipend to veterans seeking to become teachers. The rationale behind seeking out honorably discharged and retired veterans to help fill the nation's classrooms is built around the common knowledge that military veterans are highly trained, structured, and disciplined individuals. These teachers also place a high degree of value on leadership, whether it manifests itself in the principal of the school or within the classroom (Ballard, 2005; McCree, 1993).

These veterans are eager to share a lifetime of working knowledge and wisdom with young people, but according to Jenne (1997), they often depend too strongly upon these prior experiences, as do many second-career teachers. Former military, according to the author, are very prone to teach as they were taught – in a rigid, teacher-focused modality that is the antithesis to the modern emphasis on differentiated and cooperative learning. The challenge is to connect veterans, who are accomplished students and experienced professionals, with preparation programs that emphasize developing a knowledge base, rather than relying so heavily on prior experiences (Jenne, 1996). Former military are a valuable resource that can be tapped into but, as with all second-career teachers, a strong preparation program coupled with an induction and mentoring process that properly utilizes the teacher's prior work experience results in the best results for both the teacher and the students they teach.

## **Developing Teacher Identity in the Second Career**

An important, but often ignored, component of teaching is developing an identity as a teacher. This identity formation is a process that often takes a great deal of time and likely involves a shift away from idealism and naiveté toward survival mode in the first year of teaching toward reflective practice as one gains experience. The second-career teacher is not spared this often-painful process (Bullough & Knowles, 1990). Yet, the degree to which second-career teachers are able to develop an individual teacher identity may be shaped considerably by prior working experiences. Other researchers have called for the need to help second-career teachers develop a teacher identity in order to settle in the profession. Allen (2005) made the point that second-career teachers need time to reflect upon their life histories and to adapt to the profession in order to form properly a new identity, rather than undergoing the traditional baptism by fire that is common to most beginning teachers. Others call for a “post-structuralist” model focusing upon emotional attractions and reflection in order to develop fully as a teacher (Zembylas, 2003).

## **Challenges to Teacher Certification in a Second Career**

Licensure and certification have also become daunting challenges to the potential second-career teacher. As if going back to school while trying to fulfill the obligations of adult life is not enough, many states have created excessive bureaucratic hoops that one must repeatedly jump through in order to teach. As Peske, et al. (2001) stated:

Currently, there are two competing views about how to best prepare, license, and hire teachers in the years ahead. One calls for extensive preservice preparation and rigorous, enforced certification requirements. The other argues for opening many routes to teaching and deregulating teacher certification. (p. 310)

The authors contended that each approach has severe limitations as stand-alone policies and propose a “mixed model” approach to teacher certification. In addition, Serotkin (2007) pointed out the need for “more field placement and a longer pre- and post-certification training experience” (p. 211). Harrell and Harris (2006) highlighted an innovative online certification program with high admissions standards, a rigorous curriculum, and a success rate in preparing non-traditional candidates that is hard to dispute. This program has gained broad appeal because of its market-based approach. Certainly, there is a need for such approaches that maintain the integrity of the licensure process, while encouraging non-traditional candidates to apply.

### **Administrative Perspectives on Second-Career Teachers**

Second career teachers appeal to principals in the process of hiring new staff, and they save school districts money because of their prior experiences, particularly in the area of technology (Bergdoll, 2007). As a result, these teachers need less additional training to adapt to the increasing use of technology in the classroom for tasks such as attendance, grading, and instruction. These teachers may also adapt more quickly to the culture of the school as they are more willing to participate in school improvement initiatives, are more accustomed to work routines, and are already familiar with the pressure and expectations of the workplace (Tichelaar, et al., 2008). In addition, many of these teachers believe that they offer students something extra in their real world experiences. They are eager to share what they have learned in their prior work lives in order to make learning more meaningful (Chambers, 2002).

Principals also have a responsibility toward second-career teachers and need to provide support in order to prevent attrition among these valuable new employees (Watkins, 2005). As second-career teachers are likely to be viewed in the same light as experienced teachers because

of age or respect for prior experiences, they are also prone to be left alone more than traditional-aged teachers. Principals need to recognize the strengths in these teachers, but also need to remember that they are new teachers nevertheless, in need of support systems like all other new teachers (Mayotte, 2003; Mercora, 2003).

School districts can also ensure that the best second-career teachers are recruited and retained by establishing and maintaining a collaborative relationship with local colleges and universities (Christensen, 2003), and that new teachers are given appropriate first assignments, rather than the toughest teaching assignments in the district, which is likely to discourage a new teacher and contribute to the already high national attrition rate (Wise, Darling-Hammond, & Berry, 1988). Just as there are “pull” factors in teaching, such as summers off and the opportunity to work with young people, there are also “push” factors, such as inappropriate assignments, low levels of administrative support, and isolation (Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003). Administrators do well to remember these factors when they seek to hire and retain any teachers, especially those who have gone to great lengths to change careers to teaching.

### **Retention and Attrition in the Profession of Teaching**

The title “second-career teacher” implies that teaching is at least a second if not third or fourth career. If a person can make the decision to walk away from one career, after attending college and spending many years establishing a place in the working world, it is entirely plausible that some may choose to change professions again once they have become teachers. Furthermore, it is possible that constant teacher turnover has a negative effect on student motivation and performance. Bird (2004) found that teachers who leave the profession within the first five years do so because of being overworked and beaten down by disruptive student behavior. In addition, many second-career teachers are simply not prepared for the demands of

both the students and the administrative tasks of teaching (Denny, 2007). Johnson and Birkeland (2002) found that second-career alternatively prepared teachers were much more likely to leave the profession than those who were prepared by traditional programs at the customary college age. Salary and work conditions were the major contributors to most of these decisions to leave, along with the lowly status associated with the teaching profession.

On the other hand, teachers who see the profession as a calling are willing to juggle the various demands between their personal and professional lives, understanding that teaching is a difficult line of work (Waesmer, 2002). Even in the challenging setting of hard-to-staff urban schools, which are often rife with violence and underfunded, and offer poor working conditions, many second-career teachers make the decision to stay. Induction programs can be designed that foster the growth of teachers who have chosen the most difficult assignments and incentives created to keep teachers in these schools with children who need the consistency of teachers with a long-term commitment (Jorissen, 2003). Another study contended “people entering teaching through alternate routes who are in their 40s or 50s are the most committed to staying in teaching for 10 or more years” (Lerner & Zittelman, 2002, p. 33).

Teachers, given the time and encouragement to develop a reflective practice, are also much more likely to stay in the profession for the long haul. Duck (2000) suggested learning to reflect “on growth toward the profession and planning for growth within the profession” as a means for creating the endurance and freshness to sustain a career in education (p. 42).

Ultimately, second-career teachers make the decision to stay in the classroom based on a desire to grow as an individual, find a career that is congruent with family responsibilities, and because they want to make a difference (Hedrick, 2005).

### **An Analysis of the Literature**

The reasons that lead people to change careers are myriad. However, once in the classroom, these teachers fall into three general categories: those dissatisfied with their previous work, those who chose teaching after some pivotal event in their lives, and those who, although successful in a prior career, were interested in the field but have become disillusioned (Crow, Levine & Nager, 1990). How these teachers react to situations that present themselves in the teacher workday depends upon the category with which they most closely associate. Often, these second-career teachers are influenced by experiences from their prior careers (Powell, 1994). These previous working experiences and may have an equal or stronger effect upon the second career teacher than academic training. Second-career teachers can run the risk of giving these prior experiences more validity than “common learning theories, typical and atypical student characteristics, instruction practices and suggested classroom management techniques” (Etherington, 2007, p. 76). Sometimes, the circumstances under which the second career teacher decides to leave the previous career and enter teaching profession strongly influence their practice as an educator (Serow & Forest, 1994). Clearly, the literature indicates that second career teachers have different entry experiences into the profession than do those who take a traditional route.

### **Motivating Events**

Non-traditional entrants to teaching mention several factors that served as an impetus for changing careers. Among these were (1) the desire to have a career that makes a difference in the lives of other people; (2) the need to do more meaningful and fulfilling work; (3) the need to leave a legacy for future generations; (4) the desire to have a more flexible and family friendly schedule; (5) the love of a particular subject matter; (6) and the desire to share life experiences with younger people (Tigchelaar, et al., 2008). Some participants mentioned being encouraged to



change careers, particularly in order to become teachers, by family, friends, former teachers, and coaches. Many also mentioned feeling a “calling,” in a spiritual sense, to enter teaching. These motivations match closely the recent study by Smith & Pantana (2009) which found

23% of respondents offered the top reason as their love for children and desire to make a difference in their lives. The second most commonly provided answer related to their ability to teach and their enjoyment of it. Interestingly, the third most common response, given by 12% of participants, identified dissatisfaction with their previous career as their main reason for switching to teaching. (p. 7)

### **Common Experiences**

While non-traditional entrants to teaching come from a variety of backgrounds, they share some common experiences in the decision to become teachers, the teacher preparation process, and in the transition to the classroom. Many of the participants mentioned considering and then rejecting teaching as a college major as an undergraduate. Others spoke of having no initial interest in teaching whatsoever. Almost all had come to a point of dissatisfaction with the previous career. Some mentioned a sense of reaching a plateau with no real hope of advancing within the organization. Others mentioned realizing that they had chosen the wrong career upon graduating from college or the feeling that they were being led toward a career in teaching by way of a spiritual revelation, or calling.

### **Benefits of a Previous Career**

Non-traditional entrants to teaching highlight the value of having prior career experiences before becoming teachers. Although some of their previous careers may have had no crossover value in terms of skills, it nevertheless provides an opportunity to mature and experience a world outside of education that few teachers who enter the profession immediately after college ever

see. On the other hand, approximately half of the participants could point to specific skills, the use of particular computer applications or management strategies for example, that are of particular use to them now as teachers.

### **Satisfaction with the New Career**

The decision to leave one career for another can be life changing in many respects. For example, it will likely involve an extended period of financial hardship, along with the inevitable strain upon personal relationships and the ability to pursue hobbies or other interests. In many cases, teaching also results in a reduction in earnings. In order for these difficulties to be worthwhile, it is necessary for potential second-career teachers to believe that they will find some degree of satisfaction in their new profession.

Conversely, there were some distinct areas of dissatisfaction, namely, the bureaucratic nature of schools, the overwhelming demands placed on teachers to do much more than just teach, and the apathy of many students and parents. These findings are consistent with Herzberg's (2008) observations concerning a need to satisfy basic dissatisfying, or hygiene factors in the workplace. For the most part, these teachers envision themselves remaining in the teaching profession until retirement. Most confessed that the youthful idealism that many new teachers have along with a well-documented tendency among many new teachers to burn out and leave the profession early does not apply to second-career teachers. They have already passed through this phase, if it is indeed a phase, while working in a previous profession. Most of these teachers agreed that teaching is a good and honorable profession and stated that they would encourage those considering changing careers to enter the field, including their own children.

### **Noteworthy Recommendations on Second-Career Teachers**

Based, then, on a review and an analysis of the literature, suggestions for school districts, school administrators, teacher education programs, and second-career teachers are presented.

#### **Recommendations for School Districts**

The increasing number of people who are entering the teaching profession from other careers creates an opportunity for school districts to design programs that utilize their vast individual and collective experiences. That these teachers are a valuable resource to their students, schools, and communities is hard to deny. The challenge for school districts is to create innovative ways in which these teachers and their wealth of experiences can be maximized for the benefit of the current and future generations of students. Many of the participants in this study mentioned the need for school districts to create

- In-service training that utilizes second-career teachers as in-house experts with experience in diverse areas outside of education.
- Programs where real-world experiences are drawn upon to aid in teaching, especially in vocational and business education, with skills such as interviewing strategies and workplace decorum being taught by second-career teachers.
- Opportunities for students to learn and improve essential business skills that business and industry are calling for. These skills could be identified by contacting local employers.

#### **Recommendations for Teacher Education Programs**

Graduate teacher training and state alternative teacher certification that adopt blended online and residential models are a step in the right direction. These programs meet the needs of career switchers of non-traditional age who have financial and family responsibilities that simply

do not allow a full-time return to school. The appeal of these types of programs is hard to dispute and many of these programs are approved by regional and national accrediting agencies. Non-traditional entrants to teaching cite what they feel to be the less relevant aspects of training programs, such as the focus on learning theories and teaching philosophy, over practical applications. In light of these comments, teacher education programs should

- Seek to offer programs as realistic as possible, with a strong emphasis on practicums and internships.
- Provide problem-solving coursework, which would allow second-career teacher candidates to tap into previous workplace scenarios in order to solve realistic classroom and school-wide challenges.
- Understand that these students are different from traditional-age college students and have unique learning needs. When possible, teacher education programs should accommodate these students with online or blended format alternatives to the traditional classroom setting.

### **Recommendations for Potential Second-Career Teachers**

The teaching profession has much to offer the potential career-switcher. Non-traditional entrants to teaching cite, among other things, the appeal of more time off to spend with family or pursuing interests outside of work, as well as the opportunity to do meaningful work that allows one to leave a legacy. However, the potential second-career teacher should be made aware of the realities of the teaching profession. First, *time off*: whereas teaching is a profession that offers a good deal of time off, the reality, as expressed by the teachers in this study, grading, coaching, mentoring, and school-related functions, many not considered at the outset, infringe upon that time off. Second, *financial realities*: some of the non-traditional entrants to teaching, especially

those entering the profession from the corporate arena, were disappointed in the salary, although most concede they understood from the beginning that a pay cut was a sacrifice that they would have to make in order to change careers. Third, *difficult students, parents, and administrators*: many of the non-traditional entrants to teaching admit they were not adequately prepared to deal with student apathy and disrespect. In addition, some have found parents and school administrators to be equally, if not more, difficult to deal with. On the other hand, many of these second-career teachers, having dealt with difficult people and situations in their previous work settings, felt well equipped by their life experiences, rather than by formal training, to handle the various unpleasant scenarios that they have encountered in the workplace.

Based on these revelations, potential second-career teachers should

- Understand that the promise of time off alone is not enough to sustain a teacher through a career in education. Time off is a strong enticement, but the reality of teaching involves many hours spent outside of the classroom.
- Realize that teachers are not paid adequately when compared to people working in other professions with similar levels of education. The transition to a more humble lifestyle may be difficult and must be planned for.
- Be prepared to deal with students who can be unmotivated and belligerent, parents who can be detached and disrespectful, and administrators who may make unrealistic demands and may not necessarily have any appreciation for the fact that second-career teachers have been successful in a previous career.

### **Recommendations for School Administrators**

Second-career teachers can be of great value to the building-level administrator. As mentioned, these teachers are likely more mature and conscientious with a breadth of knowledge

and experience that lies waiting to be tapped. Many of these teachers have extensive child-rearing experience making them well versed in the concerns of parents in the community who are not teachers. In addition, these teachers have not been insulated by a career that, at times, can be isolated from the immediate concerns of business and industry. Administrators seeking to utilize these teachers to their full potential should

- Emphasize to second-career teachers the importance of their prior experiences and seek their input on how best to utilize this knowledge for the benefit of the entire learning community.
- Provide opportunities for second-career teachers to share their experiences with students and colleagues through formal and informal training sessions.
- Involve second-career teachers in the problem-solving and decision-making processes for the school where and when appropriate. Developing mission statements, school improvement plans, and parent involvement strategies may be areas of particular interest for second-career teachers.

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