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Preservice Second-Career Teachers in a Blended Online-Residential Preparation Program: Profiling Characteristics and Motivations (TEJ)

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Program: Profiling Characteristics and Motivations

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Abstract

This study examines preservice second-career teachers (SCTs), their motivations for switching careers, and their perceptions of the profession. Participants were graduate students in a blended online-residential Master of Arts in Teaching program (*n*=311). Profiles, characteristics, motivations, and perceptions were explored using the FIT-Choice (Factors Influencing Teaching Choice) Scale and focus groups.

Keywords: second-career teachers, career switchers, online education

Preservice Second-Career Teachers in a Blended Online-Residential Preparation

Program: Profiling Characteristics and Motivations

In the mid-1980s, school administrators began experiencing a new phenomenon in the composition of their teaching staffs. Increasingly, their faculties consisted of second-career teachers (SCTs), individuals with bachelor's degrees in non-education related fields and with years of work experience in other occupations (Haselkorn & Hammerness, 2008). This trend persisted through the mid-1990s until SCTs became the fastest growing group in teacher training programs in the new millennium (Brooks & Hill, 2004), essential to fully staffing school faculties (Kaplan & Owings, 2002). Because of the recent economic recession and the resulting massive job losses, this trend has the potential to escalate as the work force retools to seek stable employment. This influx of life-experienced newcomers into the field holds a variety of implications for school administrators and how they supervise instruction. With the proliferation of online education, an additional consideration is that prospective SCTs are seeking an alternative to traditional preparation programs. This mode of delivery for teacher licensure raises questions about the degree of qualification these candidates possess compared to those prepared in a more traditional licensure program.

Review of the Literature

SCT Profiling Characteristics

Though the media tend to highlight stories of highly paid professionals sacrificing status and salary to become teachers, these stories do not reflect the norm. A significant percentage of United States SCTs receive pay raises when they move into teaching, indicating that these career switchers may not have held the kind of prestigious

professional positions some imagine (Hasselkorn & Hammerness, 2008). Valued for

their transferrable skills, maturity, self-confidence, and philosophy of learning, military

personnel have been targeted as potential SCTs, especially through programs like Troops

to Teachers. Some educators have voiced concerns about such a large number of troops

entering the classroom because they tend to be a conservative force for maintaining the

educational status quo and are less open to progressive methods than first career teachers

are (Chambers, 2002). Australian studies have shown that SCTs there frequently come

from entertainment, science, information technology, and fields holding a similar

occupational status to that of education (Richardson & Watt, 2006; Watt & Richardson,

2008).

Kaplan and Owings' (2002) research revealed that administrators value a variety

of qualities SCTs bring to schools. They bring maturity, life experience, good work

habits, and both depth and breadth of content knowledge. They know how to apply their

content knowledge to practical situations and are perceived as being determined

individuals who collaborate with others to solve problems. Older entrants also have

lower attrition rates than do younger ones. A potentially troublesome quality for faculty-

administration relations, however, is that SCTs have a lower tolerance for extraneous

bureaucratic paperwork that they believe interferes with their work with students.

A variety of studies reveal motives for individuals choosing to teach as an initial

career, but it is worthwhile first to consider the reasons least likely for someone to make

such a choice. While teachers in the 1960s commonly selected education as a fallback

career (Richardson & Watt, 2006), this has become less common in recent years,

especially among SCTs (Watt & Richardson, 2007). For those choosing to teach in the

fields of science, technology, and math, the lowest rated motivation for doing so was to have a fallback career (Watt, Richardson, & Pietsch, 2009). Another motivation that rated consistently low was that of remuneration. Switchers to careers other than teaching rated a higher salary at the very top (Richardson, Watt, & Tysvaer, 2007), whereas switchers to teaching consistently rated it as a low motivating factor (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2008; Armour, 2003). Though written before the current economic recession, Armour's 2003 statement resonates today:

> The tepid economy is giving rise to a new breed of career changer. Unlike the job hoppers of the late 1990s, who fled traditional businesses for uncertain dot-com riches, today's career switchers are professionals in search of a sure thing. Rattled by the economic turmoil of recent years, these beleaguered workers are leaving industries shaken by layoffs for careers where the prospects are more secure, even if the pay is not as generous. . . . Even owners of businesses in hard-hit industries, who once earned six-figure incomes are closing shop to become school teachers. (p. 32)

Nature of Preparation Programs

Once SCTs commit to prepare for their newly chosen profession, what types of preparation programs do they find? Unfortunately, the literature reveals that preparation programs for older entrants vary little from those for younger college-age preservice teachers. The most distinctive features tend to be in the delivery of the preparation and not in the content of the curriculum. For example, programs designed for SCTs tend to be more intense, flexible, and accelerated in order to accommodate the candidate's work and family schedule. However, program content and instructional methodology do not

take into account the specific learning needs and life experiences of older learners

(Holland, 2004). When surveyed, potential SCTs have conveyed that the most important

aspect of a teacher training program is that it be tailored to build on the work experience

of older entrants. One study found that this feature was more important for men than

women and became more important the older SCTs were (Peter D. Hart Research

Associates, 2008).

Transition into the Field

Studies on the transition of SCTs into the field have yielded three valuable

insights for school administrators. First, supervisors' evaluations showed that SCTs

consistently were rated higher than their first career counterparts in four main areas: 1)

organization of content for student learning; 2) creating an environment for student

learning; 3) teaching for student learning; and 4) professionalism (Haselkorn &

Hammerness, 2008). Second, despite these desirable qualities, in Mayotte's study (2003)

first career teachers showed evidence of an easier transition into the field than SCTs.

This was attributed to younger teachers being more flexible and receiving more

assistance from mentors and administrators who acknowledged them as newcomers in

need of guidance. The older SCTs were viewed as new to the school but were not offered

as much assistance because of their perceived life experience and expertise. Third, when

SCTs failed, there were some interesting gender differences to note. Older males had a

somewhat higher incidence of failure than females and younger males. Zagor (2006)

speculated that this was because they were leaving a male-dominated work environment

and entering one that was overwhelmingly dominated by younger females. Initially, men

received more positive reinforcement from colleagues, but that soon waned and turned to

skepticism about their motives for leaving their previous line of work to become a

teacher. Over time, men struggled more than did women with role conflict. If they failed

to conquer the challenges faced in the transition, some became ambivalent while others

adapted a façade of confidence that blocked the reception of feedback from mentors.

Failure among women, Zagor noted, was more likely for those who had held high-

powered positions and who struggled in the transition with the loss of power and prestige.

This was manifested most commonly in strained relationships with peers.

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to explore the profiling characteristics,

motivations, and perceptions of preservice SCTs who choose to pursue their preparation

in a blended online-residential master of arts in teaching (MAT) program. It is distinct

from studies cited in the literature review in that it focuses specifically on those choosing

a teacher licensure program that is 75% online with the remaining coursework required

residentially in three one-week intensive courses. Both quantitative and qualitative data

were collected using the FIT-Choice (Factors Influencing Teaching Choice) Scale and

focus groups. The findings provide a profile of these late entrants to the field, addressing

their demographic characteristics, motivations, perceptions, and career

commitment/satisfaction. Also considered is the role the option of a blended online-

residential program played in their decision to switch careers to teaching.

Method

Sample and setting. The population (*N=721)* consisted of candidates enrolled in

a blended online-residential MAT program at a private religiously-affiliated university in

Virginia. They were seeking an initial teaching license in elementary, secondary, or

special education. Though candidates were enrolled through an online program, as part

of the licensure requirement they were compelled to attend three residential one-week

courses referred to as one-week intensives. Prior to arriving on campus for summer

intensives, candidates received an email link to an online version of the survey.

Participants (*n*=311) in the quantitative aspect of the study were those who responded.

The qualitative aspect involved six focus groups of four to six members each. A total of

32, a subgroup of those who had already taken the online survey, volunteered to

participate in these one-hour focus groups.

  Quantitative instrument. The FIT-Choice Scale determines the degree of

influence for a variety of motivations from individuals choosing teaching as a career and

is based on the conceptual framework of Expectancy-Value theory, a comprehensive

model for explaining academic and career choices. The scale includes 61 items that ask

participants about influential factors, beliefs about teaching, and their decision to become

a teacher (See Table 4). Responses are reported on a 7-point Likert scale from "not at all

important" to "extremely important." Validated in a study by Watt and Richardson

(2007), the scale was shown to have a Cronbach's alpha of internal consistency ranging

from .90 to .97. Strong convergent and divergent construct validity was evidenced with a

median .87 pattern coefficient.

  An introductory section was added to the FIT-Choice Scale in order to collect

demographic data and some open-ended responses. Participants were asked their gender,

age, ethnicity, level of education, and previous major areas of study. Open-ended items

were as follows:

- In what occupations have you worked since graduating with your bachelor's degree?

- Briefly state your main reason(s) for choosing to switch your career to become a teacher.

- Briefly state your main reason(s) for choosing a blended online-residential teacher preparation program.

- If your only option for teacher preparation had been a traditional residential program, would you still have pursued the career change? Explain your answer to the previous question.

Qualitative instrument. The qualitative element of the study served both to validate and enrich the quantitative results with stories of personal life experiences. Focus group interviews, conducted by the primary author of this study, were in-depth and minimally structured. Certain questions were emphasized with some participants more so than with others, and additional probing questions were interjected as needed. The interviewer recorded responses in field notes and conducted a content analysis to identify prominent themes. The following questions served as the interviewer's guide:

1. When you chose your undergraduate major and/or previous graduate degrees, did you consider teaching as a career at all? What were your thoughts about teaching at that time?

2. What work or other experiences (in or outside the home) did you pursue following your bachelor's and/or graduate degree(s)? Why?

3. What caused you to leave your first career?

4. At what point in your life did you decide to become a teacher?

5. Did some person or event encourage you to become a teacher? Describe.

6. What do you see yourself doing in five to ten years?

7. What caused you to choose a blended online-residential program for your teacher preparation?

8. Was enrolling in a predominantly online program your only option for undertaking a teacher education program?

9. Do you believe this program to be sufficient to prepare you for teaching compared to other types of preparation programs?

10. Should you become a teacher, what might cause you to abandon teaching as a career?

Procedure. A mixed method was implemented to gather and analyze data. Surveys were delivered online in late spring 2009 via SurveyMonkey to all MAT students who were enrolled for summer week-long residential courses. After students arrived on campus, 32 volunteers met in focus groups of four to six students each.

Results

Who chooses teaching as a second career? *Demographics.* Participants (*n*=311) in the survey reported a mean age of 35 years, with 77% of them being women and 15% earning their second master's degree. Undergraduate degrees were predominantly in business or psychology. These fields were likewise represented in those with master's degrees. Two of the participants reported having already earned doctorates in psychology. The top prior career categories held before deciding to switch to teaching included business, social work / health, finance, and school support staff.

Participants identified themselves ethnically as 76% White, 18% African American, 4%

Latino, 1% Asian, and 1% other. See Table 1 for a summary of demographic data.

Table 1

Demographics		*n=311*
Gender	Female	77%
	Male	23%
Mean Age		35 Years
Ethnicity	White	76%
	African American	18%
	Latino	4%
	Asian	1%
	Other	1%
Educational Level	BS/BA	100%
	Master's	15%
	Doctorate	0.6%
Previous Career Categories		
Business, Sales, Management		23%
Social Work, Health, Medical, Counseling		19%
Finance, Accounting, Bookkeeping, Banking		12%
School Support Staff, Paraprofessionals		10%
Ministry, Missions, Non-Profit		7%
Technology, Communications, Broadcasting		5%
Engineering, Mechanics, Architecture		4%
Military		4%
Sports, Athletic/Personal Trainer, Coach		4%
Law Enforcement, Firefighting, Correctional Officer		3%
Service Industry, Waitress, Receptionist, Seamstress		2%
Other: Government, Design, Science,		
Transportation, Homemaker, Performer, etc.		7%

Reasons for switching. In their open-ended replies to the question "Please briefly

state your main reason(s) for choosing to switch your career to become a teacher," 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. The same percentage of respondents identified the

sense of calling as their main reason. Noteworthy is the 10% who mentioned the

economic recession. See Table 2.

Table 2

Reasons for Switching Careers to Teaching	*n=311*
Love children, want to make difference	23%
Love teaching, gifted to teach	16%
Dissatisfied with previous career	12%
Called by God, led by the Lord	12%
Economy, needed stability, lost job	10%
Family time, schedule	8%
Compatible with other interests (coaching, travel, ministry, etc.)	5%
Love for school environment, content area, learning process	5%
Involvement with my own children in schools	4%
An event (retirement, loss of spouse, health, grown children, etc.)	4%
Better myself, personal enrichment	1%

Choice of blended online-residential preparation. Since all participants were enrolled in a blended online-residential preparation program in which 75% of the program was delivered online, they were asked to comment on their main reasons for selecting such a program and to state whether they still would have entered a teacher preparation program if the only option available were a traditional residential program. See Table 3 for a categorical summary of responses.

Nearly half (48%) stated that they would not have switched careers if such an online option were not available. Representative statements included the following:

- "There is no way I would have had the time to drive to a college and spend countless hours away from my family."

- "I could not have gone to school if I had to quit my present job before getting my education degree."

Statements representative of those 52% who still would have switched careers even without the option of the online-residential option were as follows:

- "It would have had to wait, and probably a long time, but I would have done it."

- "I would have gone to school, but it would have taken a big toll on us financially."

Table 3

Reasons for Choosing a Blended Online-Residential Program	n=311
Convenience, flexibility, need to travel because of military or work	37%
Family responsibilities, children, single mom	28%
Work responsibilities, must continue working full time	23%
Preferred this specific university	9%
Preferred online, needed online	3%

Why choose teaching? The FIT-Choice Scale is divided into three parts that measure 1) influential factors for deciding to teach as a career, 2) beliefs about the profession, and 3) satisfaction level of the decision. For a comprehensive summary of factors measured by the FIT-Choice Scale, see Table 4.

Influential factors for teaching. Likert scale responses for factors influencing teacher choice (Figure 1) aligned closely with participants' open-ended responses on the online survey as summarized above. The highest three ratings fell under the Expectancy-Value Theory category of Social Utility Value: 1) Shape Future of Children/Adolescents, 2) Work with Children/Adolescents, and 3) Make Social Contribution. The lowest ratings were for selecting teaching as a fallback career and for "bludging." Australian researchers and developers of the FIT-Choice Scale, Watt and Richardson (2007), explain that the term "bludging" is an Australian colloquialism that

> relates to people's adopting the laziest approach possible and choosing what they
> think will be an easy option. In the context of teaching, bludging could be based
> on people's perceptions about the length of the teacher's working day, as well as
> school holidays. (p. 173)

Table 4

FIT-Choice Scale Results   *n=311*

Factors		Item
Mean Ratings	**Influential Factors**	**Stem: "I chose to become a teacher because…"** 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*extremely important*)
6.16	**Ability**	B.5 I have the qualities of a good teacher. B.18 I have good teaching skills. B.34 Teaching is a career suited to my abilities.
5.98	**Intrinsic Career Value**	B.1 I am interested in teaching. B.7 I've always wanted to be a teacher. B.12 I like teaching. B.38 Teaching is a fulfilling career.
1.79	**Fallback Career**	B.11 I was unsure of what career I wanted. B.28 I was not accepted into my first-choice career. B.36 I chose teaching as a last-resort career.
5.19	**Job Security** Higher Order Factor: Personal Utility Value	B.14 Teaching will offer a steady career path. B.24 Teaching will provide a reliable income. B.31 Teaching will be a secure job.
4.85	**Time for Family**	B.2 Part-time teaching could allow more family time. B.15 Teaching hours will fit with the responsibilities of having a family. B.25 School holidays will fit in with family commitments.
3.89	**Job Transferability**	B.8 Teaching will be a useful job for me to have when traveling. B.20 A teaching qualification is recognized everywhere. B.35 A teaching job will allow me to choose where I wish to live.
3.22	**Bludging**	B.4 As a teacher I will have lengthy holidays. B.17 As a teacher I will have a short working day.
6.44	**Shape Future of Children / Adolescents** Higher Order Factor: Social Utility Value	B.9 Teaching will allow me to shape child/adolescent values. B.21 Teaching will allow me to influence the next generation. B.39 Teaching will allow me to have an impact on children/adolescents.
5.76	**Enhance Social Equity**	B.29 Teaching will allow me to raise the ambitions of underprivileged youth. B.37 Teaching will allow me to benefit the socially disadvantaged. B.40 Teaching will allow me to work against social disadvantage.
6.21	**Make Social Contribution**	B.6 Teaching allows me to provide a service to society. B.19 Teachers make a worthwhile social contribution. B.27 Teaching enables me to 'give back' to society.
6.28	**Work with Children / Adolescents**	B.10 I want to help children/adolescents learn. B.13 I want a job that involves working with children/adolescents. B.23 I want to work in a child/adolescent-centered environment. B.30 I like working with children/adolescents.
5.49	**Prior Teaching & Learning Experiences**	B.16 I have had inspirational teachers. B.26 I have had good teachers as role-models. B.32 I have had positive learning experiences.
3.75	**Social Influences**	B.3 My friends think I should become a teacher. B.22 My family thinks I should become a teacher. B.33 People I've worked with think I should become a teacher.
	Beliefs About Teaching	**1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*)**
5.82	**Expert Career** Higher Order Factor: Task Demand	C.6 Do you think teaching is a highly skilled occupation? C.10 Do you think teaching requires high levels of expert knowledge? C.14 Do you think teachers need high levels of technical knowledge?

		C.15	Do you think teachers need highly specialized knowledge?
6.19	**High Demand**	C.2	Do you think teachers have a heavy workload?
		C.7	Do you think teaching is emotionally demanding?
		C.11	Do you think teaching is hard work?
4.63	**Social Status** Higher Order Factor: Task Return	C.4	Do you believe teachers are perceived as professionals?
		C.8	Do you believe teaching is perceived as a high-status occupation?
		C.12	Do you believe teaching is a well-respected career?
4.34	**Teacher Morale**	C.5	Do you think teachers have high morale?
		C.9	Do you think teachers feel valued by society?
		C.13	Do you think teachers feel their occupation has high social status?
3.31	**Good Salary**	C.1	Do you think teaching is well paid?
		C.3	Do you think teachers earn a good salary?
	Your Decision to Become a Teacher		1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*)
3.54	**Social Dissuasion**	D.2	Were you encouraged to pursue careers other than teaching?
		D.4	Did others tell you teaching was not a good career choice?
		D.6	Did others influence you to consider careers other than teaching?
6.46	**Satisfaction with Choice**	D.1	How carefully have you thought about becoming a teacher?
		D.3	How satisfied are you with your choice of becoming a teacher?
		D.5	How happy are you with your decision to become a teacher?

Beliefs about the profession. Generally, participants perceived teaching as a career that is high in demand and low in return. They rated teaching as a highly demanding career requiring a heavy workload and making high emotional demands. They also considered it a highly expert career entailing specialized knowledge and abilities. At the same time, participants generally viewed teaching as relatively low in social status and as paying a low salary (Figure 2).

Career choice satisfaction. SCTs reported moderate experiences of social dissuasion from a teaching career. Regardless of this and of their perceptions of teaching as a career high in demand and low in return, the mean satisfaction rating for their choice to switch careers was high (See Table 4).

Focus group results. The in-depth focus group interviews confirmed many of the survey responses above. However, the purpose of these interviews was to probe the individual stories, to identify recurring themes in those stories, and to gain a greater understanding of the profile of SCTs. Many of the focus group members explained that
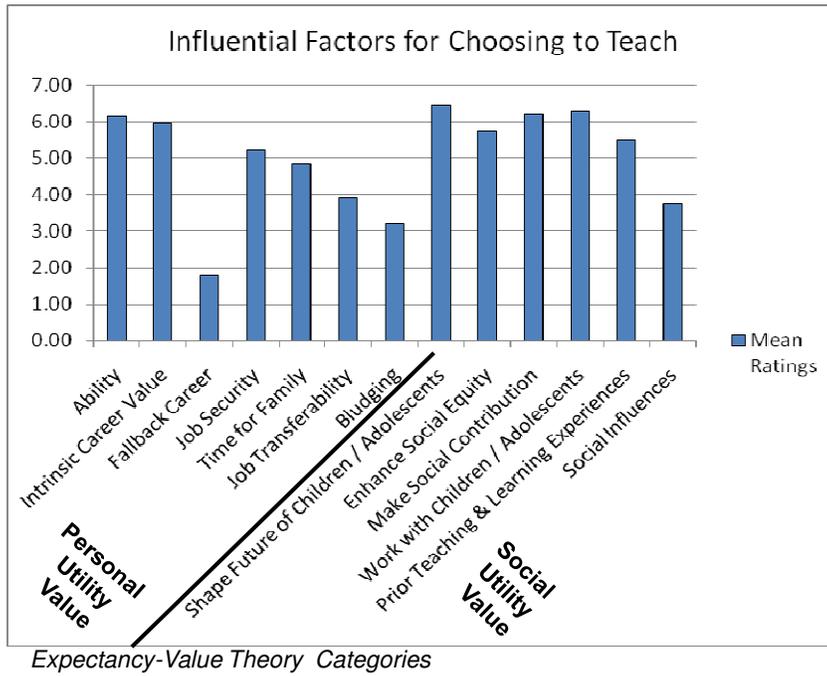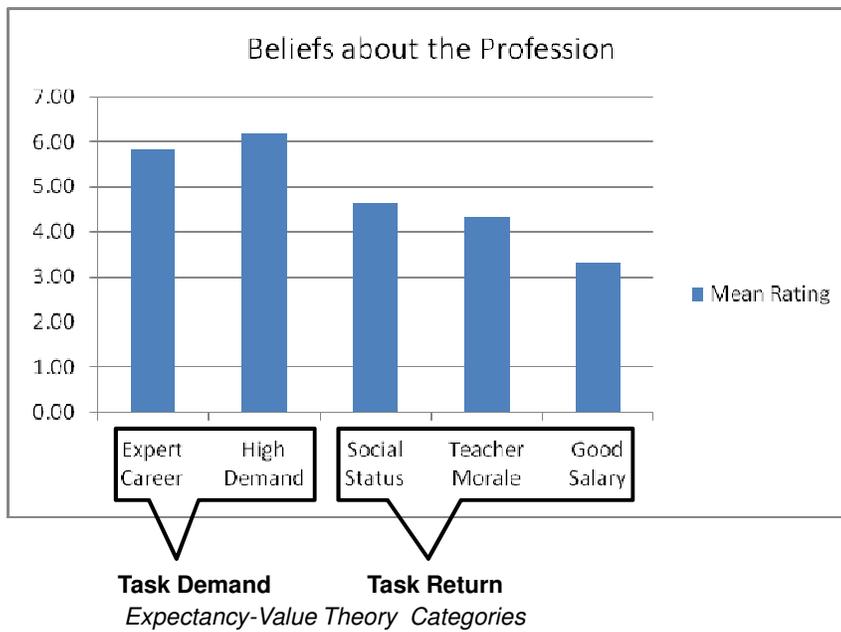
Figure 1

Influential Factors for Choosing to Teach

Expectancy-Value Theory Categories

Figure 2

Beliefs about the Profession

Task Demand   **Task Return**
Expectancy-Value Theory Categories

they did not initially choose teaching because others swayed them against it, often their

parents. One in particular spoke of how her parents convinced her to earn a bachelor's

degree in business because she would be more marketable, able to obtain a job in a

variety of fields. "Ironically, I think the degree hindered me in pursuing anything

specific," she said, "and I regretted not having pursued teacher education like I wanted to

in the first place." Others confessed that they considered education as an undergraduate

major but instead chose other degrees in hopes of earning more money.

Motives for choosing to switch careers to teaching aligned closely with survey

results. By far, altruistic themes of making a difference in the lives of young people

prevailed. However, the stories of job losses, failed businesses, and drained industries

were consistently mentioned in each of the six focus groups and brought the most probing

responses from listeners. A researcher for a prominent pharmaceutical corporation told

of how much she enjoyed her work but that economic cutbacks necessitated the closing

of her branch of the department. This forced her to consider other options, and teaching

seemed to be a stable job where she could apply her love for science. Another spoke of

how her real estate business began to provide an inconsistent income for her family as the

market dried up. This led her to consider teaching, which would provide her a lower

income but a more dependable one.

Another theme relating to motivating factors for changing careers had to do with

the participants observing their own children's experiences in schools. Some were so

pleased with how the schools dealt with their own children's special learning needs that

they were drawn to special education as a means to "pay it forward." On the other hand,

there were parents of children with special learning needs who were so disappointed with

the services the schools provided them that they were motivated to enter special education to improve the experience of other families.

One question asked participants to speculate what they would be doing five to ten years in the future. The prevailing theme was that they wanted to be enjoying success in the classroom. There were, however, a variety of responses that did not include the careers they were preparing for presently. Responses included the following: children's author, principal, school counselor, and starting a private school. Possibly one of the most telling responses was, "Ten years from now, I'd like to be retired." This comment came from a 61-year-old career switcher. Though the average age of participants in the FIT-Choice Scale was 35, there were several in their 50s and even early 60s.

The question of the sufficiency of a blended online-residential program to prepare candidates to be effective teachers brought out a defense of the value of life experience. While only a few commented on the importance of micro-teaching opportunities residential courses can provide, many others stated that they believed the program to be sufficient considering the variety of life experiences older preservice teachers bring from their previous careers. As one interviewee put it, "I would much rather my child be in a classroom with a 40 year old who had earned a master's online, had children of her own, and had run her own business for years than to be in a classroom with a 22 year old who got her teaching training in a traditional program."

Discussion

As increasing number of career switchers enter the ranks of school faculties, many of them will be doing so with different motives and preparation experiences than have been typical of second-career teachers of the past. While those of the present and

past share common altruistic desires to work with children and to make a difference in their lives, the recent recession has drawn many to switch to teaching who would not have done so otherwise. The results of this study found that 12% were motivated to switch to teaching out of dissatisfaction with their previous occupation, and 10% cited the economic recession. Although previous studies reveal high performance levels and qualities of SCTs valued by school administrators, this new influx of SCTs may bring new challenges to instructional supervisors. Whatever their reasons for switching, SCTs anticipate a higher task demand than return and a higher utility value to society than to themselves. These expectations and their rich diversity of life experiences will likely enhance their ability to impact student achievement.

A key finding of this study was that nearly half (48%) of the 311 participants claimed that they would not have chosen to switch careers without an online preparation option. With the teacher shortage growing in severity, online preparation programs may provide the flexibility potential teachers need to finalize their decision to pursue a career switch. However, the question remains whether teachers prepared in programs that are predominantly online will be as qualified as those prepared in traditional universities or face-to-face alternative licensure programs. The need exists for studies to examine the performance levels of SCTs in the field who were prepared in predominately online programs and also those who chose teaching mainly for economic reasons. Are they as effective as typical first-career teachers? How do their longevity rates compare? Do they have special induction and supervision needs?

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