

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ALTERNATIVELY  
CERTIFIED SECOND-CAREER EDUCATORS

by

Alison Harmon

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2022

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina. Currently, alternatively certified second-career educators are defined as professionals who have a degree in a field other than education but teach with an alternative license. The central question for this study was: How do alternatively certified educators describe their experiences and perceptions of the teaching profession in the first five years? The phenomenological qualitative approach unveiled the underlying reasons why alternatively certified teachers stay in education past the first five years. The theories guiding this study were Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) and Lent, Brown, and Hackett's social cognitive career theory (SCCT), as they related to self-consciousness that directed and motivated the behaviors of those connected to their career choices. The eleven participants in the study were teachers who taught in urban elementary schools beyond three to five years and are still in education in some capacity. Data analysis included reviewing and examining data from individual interviews, a focus group, and archival records. Coding was used to identify common themes and patterns. Results showed relationships with administration, staff, students, and parents weighed in as meaningful; challenges became fuel, and self-efficacy and benefits of alternative certification played a significant role in longevity.

*Keywords:* alternative certification, interviews, longevity, retention, social cognitive theory

## **Dedication**

All the glory belongs to God. From beginning to end, he has guided my mind and hand. He has been my strength and constant support.

This study is dedicated to my parents, Victor and Gladys Finegan, who provided a foundation of love and Godly principles, and instilled a passion for knowledge in their children. I still remember my Dad's words, "Do it for me!" when I came to him crying that it was too hard. Rest in Heaven, my dear parents.

Thank you for constantly checking on me to my brothers and sisters in love. To my sissy, Maria, you are such an anchor. Thank you for the constant "You can do it." Thank you for pushing me and listening to me reading to my sweet daughter. Last but by no means least, to my husband and best friend, Hugh, you are simply the most amazing person on earth. Thank you for holding it down and holding me up simultaneously. "IT IS FINISHED!"

### **Acknowledgments**

To my many friends and family members who lent an ear to listen to my thoughts. I also thank my committee for working with me and a special thank you goes to Dr. Carol Gillespie.

Thank you, Dr. Amy Jones.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

The Alternative Certificate for Teachers Program (ACT)

Teach for America (TFA)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina. Changing careers is a challenging task. Leaving a comfortable job or career to start over as a teacher is not a popular choice for many. However, becoming a second-career educator is a growing trend for various reasons. Why candidates enter teaching as a second career may appear insignificant on the surface. However, hearing about second-career educators' lived experiences, especially positive experiences, benefits those who hire, support, and supervise them. Knowledge of the second-career educator's challenges leads to better recruiting and training efforts. Being aware of the second-career educator's journey sheds light on what is needed to assist on their success path. Research on this topic helps close the teaching shortage, alleviate it somehow, and is beneficial in informing educational policies. Additionally, hearing and understanding their experiences enlightens and subsequently reduces the literature gap regarding alternatively certified skills. This chapter provides a broad background of the problem from a historical, theoretical, and social context. The situation to self section highlights the connection between the researcher and the study. In chapter one, the problem and purpose statements and the significance of the study shape, in detail, the study's motivations. Chapter one identifies the importance of the research by way of the central questions and sub-questions. The chapter concludes with definitions of terms relevant to the study and a summary.

## Background

The concept of teacher retention is a current dilemma in education in America (Washington, 2016). Alternative certification, historically, was one way to address teacher retention. Alternative certification is the process of hiring individuals with undergraduate degrees in a discipline other than education and certifying them to teach (Brenner et al., 2015; Certification Map, 2019). According to Bertrand (2019), the traditional college and university-based teacher training programs were the primary routes to teaching before 1982. Participants in the training programs were required to know the core subjects, take education classes, and matriculate through student teaching and field experiences that lead to teaching certification (Bertrand, 2019). Policymakers introduced The Alternative Certificate for Teachers Program (ACT) of 2004 to address the dilemma when first identified as a problem (Sawchuk, 2013). Brown (2018) added that alternatively certified educators filled staffing needs through this initiative and brought a new level of expertise and professionalism with them. Bertrand (2019) noted that quality teacher preparation involved teacher training, knowledge of pedagogy, student teaching or field experience, and a level of self-efficacy that is not taught but naturally acquired. Rose and Sughrue (2020) added that while alternatively certified teachers entered the profession with limited skill sets related to education and little or no teaching experience, their strong content expertise and prior work experience supported them well. This study uses a phenomenological methodology to explore alternatively certified teachers' perceptions and lived experiences in their second careers (Bowling & Ball, 2018). Numerous studies have captured the stories of teachers as it relates to teacher retention, but few have documented the lived experiences of alternatively certified educators (Bowling & Ball, 2018; Brenner et al., 2018;

Certification Map, 2019; Harrell et al., 2019; Hopkins et al., 2019; Redding & Smith, 2016; Thompson, & Brooks, 2019; Youngs, 2013.)

Studying the lived experiences of alternatively certified educators may add to the research that influences policymakers to push for updates and change (Green, 2015; Zirkle et al., 2019). Data from this study may lead to improvements in teacher and retention efforts, ultimately impacting schools and students positively (Anderson, 2018). According to Thompson (2018), duplicating the safeguards alternatively certified teachers experience might increase second-career educators' retention rate. This study's data may lead to universal alignment in alternative routes to teacher certification (Bertrand, 2018). Additionally, alternative certification program alignment across states may help raise the percentage of alternatively certified teachers staying in teaching and succeeding (Stanton, 2017).

### **Historical Context**

The teacher shortage and the need for an expedited teacher-training route to help meet the challenges of education resulted in developing alternative certification programs (Bertrand, 2019). The entry of alternatively certified teachers to education developed in the 1980s. Some hiring entities have brushed aside the risk associated in this type of hiring due to need (McElroy, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reported that of the 3,377,900 professionals teaching in public schools across the country, 84 percent remained at the same school. Of the 3,377,900, eight percent left teaching before completing their probationary years, and eight percent moved to a different school. Challenges affected teacher movement and retention. Among those challenges was an increase in student population levels (Griffin, 2018). In terms of teacher retention, Ring (2016) noted that managing day-to-day classroom

management and dealing with student discipline were first-year teachers' issues.

### **Theoretical Context**

Time and attention have been given to teacher retention as it affects teachers, students, administrators, and hiring personnel. The numerous studies that exist support this notion (Bowling & Ball, 2018; Brenner et al., 2018; Certification Map, 2019; Harrell et al., 2019; Hopkins et al., 2019; Redding & Smith, 2016; Thompson, & Brooks, 2019; Youngs, 2013). More data centered on alternatively certified educators' lived experiences are needed to add to the collection of existing research regarding alternative certification.

### **Social Context**

According to Zirkle et al. (2019), retaining alternatively certified educators, after initial employment, is an ongoing issue that requires additional research. Alternative certification impacts new teachers in various ways. Some alternatively certified teachers report experiencing stress while others suffer teacher burnout. Some of these alternatively certified educators blamed their discontent on job demands and lack of adequate preparation (Smith & Smalley, 2018; Zirkle et al., 2019). On the other hand, in some states, the initiatives put in place to retain alternatively certified teachers, including induction and mentoring, have increased second-career educator retention (Zirkle et al., 2019). Additionally, as part of the alternative teacher licensure track, candidates are provided with supports such as coursework and mentoring (Ring, 2016; Shuls & Trivitt, 2015). This research study addresses the gap in the literature, with a specific focus on the role of self-efficacy and the sense of preparedness and commitment of those teachers trained through an ACP.

### **Situation to Self**

My entrance into education was semi-traditional and semi-alternative. I entered college as a business major but needed a job to support myself. The school system hired me as a teaching assistant, and my desire to teach grew from there. I switched my major in my junior year and graduated with the minimum education credits required but enough to teach. My bias is that having a career previously allowed me to gain experience, which made up for the educational teacher training that I missed as a business major. Therefore, the study intrigues me because, in some ways, it mirrors my pathway to teaching.

As an undergraduate student, I majored in business but switched to education in my junior year. I was fortunate to experience an abbreviated version of student teaching because I switched to a new major late in the program. Student teaching, although shortened, gave me a vast wealth of knowledge and insight. In-service professional development and mentoring were the redeeming features that made the transition for me more comfortable. As a new teacher, I struggled with classroom responsibilities managing resources, managing behaviors, keeping up with the rigor of teaching on a testing grade, providing differentiation, building parent-teacher relationships, and teaching the curriculum with fidelity. The main struggle was differentiating the content with ease to students with varying abilities. It took me years to understand that I could not teach every student the same way.

On the other hand, classroom management was a strength I gained while working as a teaching assistant before getting my classroom. Delegating tasks to my students and gradually releasing control of learning to my students were other areas of struggle. Unfortunately, as soon as my first school year began, so did classroom observations and other evaluative mandates.

Students in grades three through five take annual state and district tests. These grades, also known as testing grades, are challenging grades to teach for seasoned teachers because of the rigor and pace of the curriculum. For the new teacher, teaching in grades three through five is challenging for the same reasons as for a seasoned teacher, and because the new teacher is learning the curriculum while teaching it. Personally speaking, teaching in grades three through five weighed on me emotionally, because if students did not pass the state tests, they would have to repeat the grade. If a large percentage of students in a particular teacher's class did not pass, then that teacher was viewed as incompetent and risked termination. To ensure that my students were prepared for passing the state tests, I found myself limiting teaching only what I believed would be on state tests.

As the years progressed and with guidance from seasoned teachers, I became confident in teaching the curriculum and differentiating instruction. I interviewed for and was hired as a literacy coach. In this capacity, I was responsible for modeling literacy practices to new and seasoned teachers. My responsibilities also included providing professional development sessions in literacy to teachers so they could obtain literacy endorsement. Working as a literacy coach entailed working with teachers to pinpoint issues with student growth and the curriculum. Another duty was to model setting goals, using data to inform instruction, and problem solve. Duties that involved working with school administration included developing a school-based literacy team and creating pacing guides for teachers.

When I thought back to my early years, I recalled those feelings of inadequacy and wanting to give up. I took a personal oath to help every new teacher along his or her journey. Moving forward, when I worked with new teachers, I changed my approach to fit their needs. I

operated in a dual role as a literacy coach and cognitive coach. Cognitive coaching involves providing emotional support the way a mentor would. New teachers needed a greater amount of emotional support than seasoned teachers did (Grafwallner, 2017). I can attest to the idea that the first five years in teaching are challenging because I was once in that category and remember the struggle. However, the time has come for me to perceive the phenomenon through objective eyes as I research the stories and experiences of alternatively certified teachers.

This study will use an ontological and axiological framework grounded in social constructivism. Ontological assumption enables the participants to describe and reflect on their experiences with alternative certification (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In axiology, knowledge is best understood through direct, firsthand, and sometimes subjective interactions with participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). This study will use social constructivism as the interpretive framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The theory behind using social constructivism as the interpretive framework is that subjects understand the world they live and work in through direct interactions and experiences. I believe that a direct connection between a participant's success in teaching and their social interactions exists. The social constructivism interpretive framework I will use to guide this study is necessary for getting a true sense of participants' multiple experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is the existence of a widespread teacher shortage in the country (Donitsa-Schmidt & Zuzovsky, 2016; Redding & Smith, 2016). Even though teacher shortages look different in terms of subject matter and region, it continues to be a dilemma in recent years. The teacher shortage crisis has shown up in almost every state in the U.S. (Behrstock-Sherratt &

Rizzolo, 2014). One method used to address the teacher shortage has been to hire individuals with a bachelor's degree and certify them through alternative certification (Brenner et al., 2015). Licensing authorities believed that hiring alternatively certified educators could alleviate the problem (Bowling & Ball, 2018; Certification Map, 2019; Harrell et al., 2019). To date, few studies pinpoint the day-to-day practices and experiences of alternatively certified educators. Furthermore, few initiatives that support alternatively certified teachers at the building level and beyond are represented in the literature (Ball, 2016).

A lack of research exists to give voice to the experiences of alternatively certified teachers. It is essential to learn about the experiences of the alternatively certified teacher population. This study will add to the body of empirical literature that addresses what motivates and influences such a depth of commitment among alternatively certified teachers (Choi et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2017). Principals, district personnel, and policymakers, through this study, will become aware of the lived experiences of alternatively certified candidates (Brenner et al., 2018). Researching the population's lived experiences surrounding alternative certification in urban schools will bring awareness to the stories that exist (Etheredge, 2015; Foote et al., 2011; Hohnstein, 2017).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina (Bowling & Ball, 2018). At this stage in the research, alternative certification is defined as a state-recognized process by which individuals with an undergraduate degree are authorized to teach without experience or training in education outside of education (Bowling &

Ball, 2018). The theories guiding this study are Bandura's social cognitive theory and Lent, Brown, and Hackett's social cognitive career theory. Both theories emphasize that adaptive behaviors are learned through interactions with peers and colleagues' life experiences (Learning Theories, 2020; McElhaney, 2016; Richardson-Spears, 2018; Watkins, 2019). According to Rubenstein et al. (2018), Social cognitive theory is a learning theory that spotlights the circular relationship between behaviors, actions and reactions, and the environment. Applying social cognitive theory and social cognitive career theory to this study will first explain how alternatively certified educators' perceptions, actions, and reactions correspond to their environment. Second, the theories will clarify how a teacher's creativity and adaptability connect to the environment. Third, the theories will describe how teachers' social interactions with the environment shape their perception (Richardson-Spears, 2018; Rubenstein et al., 2019). Further, these theories provide a framework for exploring how the experiences influence alternatively certified educators to choose to stay in teaching past the first five years.

### **Significance of the Study**

This phenomenological study contributes to the larger body of literature that addresses teacher shortages that still exist and affect school districts and human resource departments at an alarming rate (Bertrand, 2019). Large amounts of dollars go toward yearly teacher recruitment and training to close growing teacher vacancies (Cohen, 2015). Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas (2016) added that recruitment should not be the only focus of hiring agencies but retaining educators, whether traditionally trained or through alternative certification, should be a point of discussion and action. Ellis (2019) agreed that equal importance is placed on keeping the teachers hired. Due to the expectancy of teachers leaving, traditionally trained, or entering

through alternative routes, Ellis (2019) concluded that policymakers address the teacher retention dilemma sooner rather than later. The teacher retention dilemma summoned the Alternative Certification for Teachers initiative (Sawchuk, 2013). Alternative certification is a secondary route to teacher licensing (Redding & Smith, 2016). According to Washington (2016), alternatively certified educators are teachers with a degree in an area outside of education and no preservice training in teaching. The stories of alternatively certified educators have not been widely told; therefore, this study will explore their lived experiences.

The stories of alternatively certified educators have not been widely told; therefore, this study will explore their lived experiences. The stories of alternatively certified educators will be significant to school leaders, hiring personnel, school districts, and policymakers (Brown, 2018). This study will explore alternatively certified teachers' experiences with no preservice training and give insight into their professional needs. In general, the teacher shortage is a prominent dilemma even today but alternatively certified teachers' sentiments are neglected (Washington, 2016). This study will relate stories that have gone unheard, reveal various entities' efforts to retain this population, and nurture a greater understanding of alternative teacher experiences (Troesch & Bauer, 2017; Stelly, 2020; Washington, 2016). It is hoped that this study provides valuable insights to school leaders and policymakers to allow them to attract, hire, and retain alternatively certified teachers (Anderson, 2018).

A significant gap exists in the research on alternatively certified educators. This population's experiences and their impact on teacher retention are still unknown (Bowling & Ball, 2018; Rose, 2019). The study's theoretical significance gives insight into how second-career educators experience alternative certification (Certification Map, 2019; Childre,

2014; Choi et al., 2018; Foote et al., 2011; Hawkins, 2017). This study will add to the growing body of research centered on alternatively certified educators.

This phenomenological study has empirical significance for teachers, administrators, hiring personnel, and researchers. This study will acknowledge that valuable stories, from alternatively certified teachers' perspectives, exist (Banks, 2016). In some states, alternatively certified teachers were viewed as beneficial and as experts (Gelfer et al., 2015). Seasoned teachers and administrators enjoyed and valued the second-career educator's attitudes toward collaboration (Gelfer et al., 2015). As noted by Gelfer et al., (2015), second-career educators were influential in areas where some traditionally trained teachers were weak.

This phenomenological study also has practical significance in that it sheds light on what second-career educators bring to the field. According to Carver-Thomas (2018), alternatively certified teachers enhanced professionalism in their new sites. Washington (2016) added that second-career educators brought levels of leadership skills to the school workplace. This study will explore the principal's views on alternatively certified educators as an answer to high teacher turnover (Newblom, 2013). This study will shed light on initiatives for teacher preparation (Consuegra et al., 2014).

### **Research Questions**

This study explores the effects of alternative certification as an answer to high teacher turnover (Newblom, 2013). This study sheds light on teacher preparation and explores the perceptions of alternatively certified second-career educators using a phenomenological research design. Data from alternatively certified educators who experienced the phenomenon addresses the following central question and guiding questions (Consuegra et al., 2014; Creswell, 2018):

### **Central Question**

*How do alternatively certified educators describe their experiences and perceptions of the teaching profession in the first five years?* Teacher shortages lead to the hiring of professionals with no education degree or experience (Watkins, 2019). According to the National Center for Education Information, alternative routes to teacher certification have had a significant impact on many aspects of the teaching occupation Gracia (2015) applauded the alternative certification initiative and added that some educational leaders started as alternatively certified educators. Some State Education departments, as part of the initial licensure and or tenure process, grant new teachers a probationary period for up to five years (Clement, 2016; Fried, 2019; Virginia Department of Education, 2021). State education departments believe that new teachers become equipped enough to have longevity in teaching at or around the five-year mark when supported through induction programs and professional development from the first to fifth year (Nixon, Luft & Ross, 2017).

### **SQ1**

*How has self-efficacy given the second-career educator an advantage?* Stanton (2017) reported that alternatively certified teachers possessed various coping strategies developed in their previous careers. The research suggested that the coping strategies that alternatively certified teachers possessed provided support to them in their teaching positions (Stanton, 2017). West and Frey-Clark (2019) noted that second-career educators had a strong sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence in their ability to succeed. Self-efficacy is defined as confidence in one's aptitude to thrive when carrying out tasks (Rozell, 2019). The research suggested that alternatively certified educators possessed the kind of self-efficacy that made them able to handle

adverse situations because they previously worked in other professional circuits (Rozell, 2019). Rozell (2019) showed that the self-efficacy of second-career educators exhibited, through interactions with their students, transferred to their students, thus improving the student's self-efficacy. Martin (2018) observed how second-career educators have the convenience of referring to past professional experiences when making decisions in the classroom. Poole (2018) recounted how alternatively certified educators credited their previous and professional experiences for their decision-making skills. Watkins (2019) concluded that alternatively certified educators came into teaching already possessing formal structure.

### **SQ2**

*What outcome expectations did second-career educators experience?* According to Bauer et al. (2017), factors that drove second-career changers to teach came from a desire to share their personal positive previous experiences with the younger society, thus molding them to operate positively. Some alternatively certified teachers reported that their certification pathways appealed to them because they presented a less taxing path to job fulfillment (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007). Other second-career educators said that intrinsic motivations were more appealing than extrinsic ones (Baeten & Meeus, 2016; Wilkins, 2017). Other noted reasons second-career educators chose teaching centered more on what they could leave behind in the first career, such as burnout, frustration from a nine to five workday, and job instability (Baeten & Meeus, 2016).

### **SQ3**

*How do participants describe the benefits of participating in an alternative certification path to a new career as teachers?* Thompson (2018) stated that alternatively certified educators

embraced building-level initiatives in their new settings, such as mentoring and professional development, and took advantage of the added safeguards and became teacher mentors.

### **Definitions**

1. *Alternative Certification* – Alternative certification is a status that professionals with degrees outside of teaching can identify with officially. Candidates entering teaching with degrees from other fields can be credentialed to fill a need in the classroom under an alternative certification (Certification Map, 2019; Spann Casey, 2019).
2. *Influencer*- Something or someone who can convince or change people’s minds and cause them to think or believe another way (Collins, 2020).
3. *In-service* – The combination of emotion and personal valuation of a task resulting in a desire for various levels of enjoyment (Watkins, 2019).
4. *Reciprocity*- The agreement between states to accept a candidate’s teaching credentials allows them to teach with no additional requirements (Wise, 2019).
5. *Self-efficacy* – Attitude or psychological tendency that involves evaluating oneself with some degree of favor or disfavor (Educational Research, 2019; Watkins, 2019).

### **Summary**

This phenomenological study explored the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators. Research shows that a teacher shortage existed (Bowling & Ball, 2018; Brenner et al., 2018; Certification Map, 2019; Harrell et al., 2019). The alternative certification could be a potential solution to help eliminate the teacher shortage (Etheredge, 2015; Rose, 2019). This study explored the perspectives of alternatively certified teachers who kept teaching past the probationary years. It was hoped that by examining the

voices of alternatively certified second-career teachers, helpful insights into recruiting, hiring, and retaining these individuals in our schools would be discovered (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Etheredge, 2015; Harmon 2016).

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina. This chapter includes a literature review on teacher shortage and the need for alternative certification to address the teacher shortage. For decades, the topic of teacher shortage and how to address it has been a discussion point among administrators, policymakers, school districts, colleges, and universities (Behrstock-Sherratt & Rizzolo, 2014; Bertrand, 2019; Redding & Smith, 2016). The chapter opens with a discussion on the theoretical framework for this study. A literature review concerning alternatively certified educators is included and information about how the teacher shortage problem has been handled in the past. Also discussed in this chapter are the contributions and drawbacks of alternative certification on teacher retention (Donitsa-Schmidt & Zuzovsky, 2016; Haim & Amdur, 2019; Mentzer et al., 2019; Zirkle et al., 2019). The perspectives of administrators, policymakers, school districts, colleges, and universities are highlighted in this chapter and proposed updates to the initiatives that can impact alternatively certified educators and strengthen the workforce. The chapter concludes with a summary of what is known, unknown and establishes the literature gaps to address the teacher shortage in this country today.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Several guiding theories may explain why professionals with no educational training or background enter teaching through alternative certification. The ones most applicable to this study are grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986, 2001) and Lent, Brown, and

Hackett's social cognitive career theory (1994, 1996, 1999). Both social cognitive theory and social cognitive career theory SCCT provide a rationale of how influences shape individuals, and in the case of this study, a group's professional development and career decisions, both inwardly and outwardly. This study also spawns a particular focus on self-efficacy and its role in teacher attrition (Beauchamp et al., 2019; Bertrand, 2019; McElroy, 2019).

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Bandura (2001) developed the social cognitive theory in the 1970s. The idea of social learning dated back earlier than the 1960s and is connected to the works of B.F Skinner, William McDougal, Edward Tolman, C. Honzik, and William Jones (Osborne, 2018). The social cognitive theory is understanding self-learning and adapting to situations and settings, driven by behavior and contentment (Bandura, 2001). Bandura (2001) believed that individuals learned by observing others' reactions and others' treatment. For example, if a smaller group appeared to receive positive attention from the larger group for something, on-lookers would likely begin to admire or gravitate toward the smaller group based on observation.

Similarly, suppose a more modest group exhibits negative behavior and receives adverse reactions from the larger group? In that case, the chances are that the on-looker will deter from employing the acts of the smaller group (Bandura, 2001). According to Bertrand (2019), some believe Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory was more of a measure of one's confidence and less of one's competence. According to Griffin (2018), the social cognitive learning theory connected confidence, competence, and social interaction and learning. Bandura (2001) armed himself with the thought that people did not excel in isolation but rather in settings rich in social

allowances. He believed that the apprehension of knowledge fueled human intellect (Green, 2015).

As we understand it, social cognitive theory influenced how the behaviors and interactions of others shaped an individual's actions and how that individual responded to others based on self-regulation (Osborne, 2018). Social cognitive thinkers believe that an individual's interpretation of present observations influences future responses (Stelly, 2020). The social cognitive theory explained that social behavior and contentment enabled learning and adapting to situations and settings. Green (2015) added that individuals gained knowledge of their environments through life experiences and intellectual and social engagement with peers and others. Bandura (2001) believed that people learned and thrived in settings rich in social allowances rather than in isolation. Bandura also recognized that a connection between social cognitive theory and self-efficacy existed.

From an educational psychology standpoint, Theorist Jerome Bruner (1960-1980) believed, from a broad perspective, that emotions, aspirations, confidence, and optimism fed cognitive development (Woodhouse, 2017). Similarly, Bandura (1986, 2001) and Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994, 1996, 1999) emphasize that individuals learned adaptive behaviors through interactions with peers, those they work with, and life experiences (Learning Theories, 2020; Sutcher et al., 2016; Richardson-Spears, 2018). Finally, a literature review from a theoretical standpoint hinted that social interactions and experiences influenced an alternatively certified educator's behaviors to halt or advance their career (Anderson, 2018; Learning Theories, 2020; Sutcher et al., 2016; Richardson-Spears, 2018).

### **Social Cognitive Career Theory**

Social cognitive career theory is another theory that frames this study. It was coined initially in 1994 by Lent et al. and was grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory. Social cognitive career theory comprises three variables: self-efficacy, outcome expectation, and personal goals (Lent et al., 1994). The first variable embedded in social cognitive career theory is an element of understanding or sub-component called self-efficacy (Lent & Brown, 1996; Lent et al., 1994; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999). According to McElhaney (2016), self-efficacy is defined as the ability to face challenges with perseverance and self-motivation, believing that one will be successful. McElhaney (2016) added that self-efficacy is a belief in oneself that goals are attainable. Under the definition of self-efficacy is the mindset of being a risk-taker (Beauchamp et al., 2019).

The second element of understanding or sub-component of social cognitive career theory is outcome expectation (Lent & Brown, 1996; Lent et al., 1994; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999; Richardson-Spears, 2018). Outcome expectation is driven by an individual's thoughts of the consequences of success with tasks (Richardson-Spears, 2018). An example of outcome expectation in this study is portrayed when alternatively certified educators put extra effort into being successful in their second careers. Another way outcome expectation is exemplified in second-career educators is when the alternatively certified educator takes heed to the social cues their colleagues exhibit in the school setting and changes his behavior (Lent et al., 1994). Personal goals comprise the third component of social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994). Alternatively, certified educators have already set a goal of earning a degree. They determine their next steps based on their abilities, knowledge, and success with previous tasks. In the case

of this study, alternatively certified educators transition to teaching as a second career by simply setting new goals (Lent et al., 1994).

According to McElroy (2019), although numerous studies exist concerning self-efficacy and job satisfaction in general education, few directly or exclusively report on those experiences relative to alternatively certified educators. Helms-Lorenz and Maulana (2016) and Sciuchetti and Yssel (2019) mentioned that they found a relationship in their studies on self-efficacy and job satisfaction between the two concepts in their examination of preservice teachers.

Self-efficacy is a person's judgment of his or her own ability to reach a personal goal and succeed in his current setting (Wilde, 2019). Experience forms the mindset that self-efficacy cultivates (Troesch & Bauer, 2017). Previous experience in a job, whether related to or unrelated to education, is a critical factor for projected success in the future (McElroy, 2019; Troesch & Bauer, 2017).

Those individuals who possessed self-efficacy also possessed the qualities that made taking-on adversities and added stress that comes with the following aspirations attainable (McElhaney, 2016). Green (2015) added that an individual's self-efficacy caused him to learn by watching others, thus shaping personality. Green (2015) further proposed that because individuals learned from watching others, social cognitive theory, in some cases, could be considered either a hindrance or a motivation. In contrast, Stelly (2020) noted that the alternatively certified teacher was motivated by the building's seasoned teacher. The alternatively certified teacher applied the new learning through observation, with ease, because of prior work experience. Troesch and Bauer (2017) added that prior experience was an important variable that influenced self-efficacy related to remaining in teaching.

The social cognitive theory centers on how individuals perceive and learn from prior experiences and how what they learn informs their belief in themselves to be successful (Martin, 2018; Rozell, 2019). Social cognitive career theory centers on job satisfaction and fitting in at the new job site. It also encompasses how individuals see themselves as contributing to the new environment. Lastly, social cognitive theory encompasses how valued individuals feel in their new environment (Richardson-Spears, 2018). Both theories fit this study in that they both look closely at an individual's assimilation to new concepts based on self-knowledge, self-awareness, and past experiences (Bandura, 2001; Lent & Brown, 1996; Lent et al., 1994; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999; Richardson-Spears, 2018).

According to Pircon (2019), the individual whose childhood desire was to become a teacher and earn a degree in education experienced discontentment once actually working in the field. Feelings of discontent were strong enough to cause some individuals to leave soon after starting (Bowen et al., 2019). Pircon (2019) noted that when new teachers started their careers, their passion drove their performance and tolerance. But after some time, job-security worries turned the labor of love into a burden (Yeatts-Lonske, 2018). According to Childre (2014), the decision to stay in teaching beyond the probationary years was a debatable decision that affected more than the individual. Teacher choices to leave or remain in education were influenced by whether the current situation was meaningful, practical, and enjoyable (Childre, 2014; Etheridge, 2015; Harmon, 2016).

To summarize, self-efficacy is an individual's belief in success with tasks and assignments (Richardson-Spears, 2018). Self-efficacy is an individual's belief that they can accomplish a task (Beauchamp et al., 2019). Social cognitive thinkers, who possess self-efficacy,

believe that their interpretation of present observations influences future responses (Osborne, 2018). The competencies, social behavior, and contentment of second-career educators may be what molds and motivates them to stay in teaching. Individuals gather information regarding their success in the field and comfort in their position from a social and meaningfulness standpoint (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Woodhouse, 2017).

### **Related Literature**

Dell'Angelo and Richardson (2019) reported up to 30% of the teacher workforce exited the profession within the first three to five years. Of all the professional careers, teaching experienced the highest turnover (Dell'Angelo & Richardson, 2019). Some of the conditions that teachers reported as contributors to job dissatisfaction were loss of autonomy, limitations in feedback. A lack of recognition, barriers in advancement, and a lack of reward were also mentioned as promoting. The effects of these factors may diverge depending on the educator, but they lead to high teacher turnover as a collective.

A nationally recognized representative cohort of educators confirmed the phenomenon of teacher turnover in a recent longitudinal study (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). After five years, 29 percent of teachers changed schools or districts, and 17 percent stopped teaching altogether, indicating a total of 46 percent of teachers that mobilized. This data, along with the ever-increasing K-12 student population numbers, suggested that there would be a resulting deficit in teacher supply to the market (Aragon, 2016). The effects of teacher turnover did not affect teachers alone (Zavelevsky & Lishchinsky, 2020). The Learning Policy Institute (2017) reported the cost of retention across the United States at \$1,155,000 in 2017. According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019), school districts endured an added financial

burden when a teacher resigned. Harrell et al. (2019) added that student instruction was halted when a teacher left, and much-needed resources had to be redirected to recruiting. Recruiting and hiring a substitute teacher to teach until the position is permanently filled is also an added cost (Harrell et al., 2019). Besides the financial strain caused by teacher attrition, other educators experienced an increase in workload, which led to frustration and discouragement (Yeatts-Lonske, 2018). According to Dell'Angelo and Richardson (2019), teacher turnover ultimately impacted student learning and achievement. Zavelevsky and Lishchinsky (2020) noted that not retaining new teachers tarnished the school's track record and ability to maintain organizational consistency.

### **Initiatives**

A shortage of teachers in the United States nearly four decades ago was spurred by seasoned teacher retirement, increased student population, and growing federal mandates that targeted high needs, under-performing schools (Wheless, 2019). Additionally, few college students choosing teaching as their major added to the shortage (Corcillo & Allen, 2018). Through traditional teacher preparation programs, matriculation declined dramatically over the years (Corcillo & Allen, 2018; Wilde, 2019). The drop increased from 725,000 in 2010 to 441,000 in 2015-16. A survey of some high school seniors in 2016 reported less than 5% considered majoring in education. The same survey completed 10 years earlier reported between 9% to 10% of high school seniors planned to pursue a teaching degree. Need areas that have continued to widen are special education, math, and science (Corcillo & Allen, 2018).

Among other things, an undersupply of teachers from traditional teacher preparation programs raised the issue of teachers who left the profession both voluntarily and involuntarily

for personal reasons (Wilde, 2019). At one point, the Greenville County School District in South Carolina had a 520-teacher vacancy void (Corcillo & Allen, 2018). Since that time, retaining teachers in inner-city schools past the first five years has been an ongoing dilemma for principals, school districts, and policymakers (Banks, 2016). One solution to the teacher shortage was to offer state-to-state licensure acceptance through reciprocity (Evans, 2020). According to Wise (2019), some teachers could transition from one state to another and have their licensure transfer with them. Unfortunately for other teachers, the transfer process involved more tests, added costs for applicants, and even negotiations. The lack of flexibility in reciprocity and licensure added to the teacher shortage (Wise, 2019). Banks (2016) concurred that the varying educational mandates and state-by-state educational policies impacted teacher shortages. According to Aragon (2016), this unique admixture of policies that governed a state's educational system made it difficult to make an argument for national teacher supply numbers coherently. Some states continue to struggle to attract and retain teachers when the licensure requirements and the credentialing process are known as reciprocity and do not fuse with other states (Aragon, 2016; Evans, 2020).

According to Bos and Gerdeman (2017), school districts responsible for filling vacancies had difficulty keeping qualified teachers. Borowicz (2020) concurred that retaining teachers was a deep concern. Teachers left for various reasons (Bos & Gerdeman, 2017). Some retired, and others transferred or resigned. Unfortunately, when some teachers left, their specific positions became hard to staff because of the subject area or specialization. Recruiting continues one part of the teacher attrition dilemma, and retention is the other part (Bos & Gerdeman, 2017).

### **Alternative Certification**

The teacher shortage triggered the development of alternative routes to teacher certification beginning in the early 1980s. From 1960 to 1990, incoming teachers needed only to earn a four-year degree in education from an accredited teacher education program (Wheless, 2019). According to Mentzer et al. (2019), several states dating back to the 1980s expanded their teaching avenues by hiring alternatively certified professionals. The state of New Jersey boasted establishing the first alternative teaching certification pathway in the United States. What was intended to entice graduates with liberal arts majors to bring their degrees to the classroom became a welcomed choice for many other graduate majors and even those with more specialized degrees. Based on need, some candidates were fast-forwarded to the classroom as soon as they received their degree in hand (Butler, 2018).

The teacher shortage in Greenville, SC, led to the launch of the Greenville Alternative Teacher Education Program (GATE). Candidates in the GATE program took courses during the summer, receiving support from a team of coaches and mentors, to be certified by the start of the school year. Today, alternative certification programs are not only based on college and university campuses but also in school districts and independent educational agencies (Corcillo & Allen, 2018). The state of Kentucky worked to staff their teaching vacancies with alternatively certified educators as well. By 2010, The Kentucky General Assembly created more than seven alternative teacher certification pathways, each unique in its expectations and distinct requirements. The state of New Jersey followed up shortly after with its alternative certification pathway. Within the next span of ten years, alternative certification programs tripled (Butler, 2018).

Another response to the teacher shortage that dated back to the 1970s was Teach For America (TFA) (Mentzer et al., 2019). Second-career educators apply to the program, and school districts employ them year to year, without reservation (Chambers, 2017). According to McNew-Birren et al. (2018), the initiative loomed in popularity because it aims to fill vacancies in hard-to-staff urban, suburban, and rural schools. Its mission has continued for more than 25 years (Hohnstein, 2017; Teach for America, 2020). Teach for America participants undergo a rigorous certification process (Thomas, 2018). According to McNew-Birren et al. (2018), college graduates with degrees in areas outside of teaching and second-career professionals make up the majority of today's competent applicants.

What set Teach for America apart was the unique way they selected candidates (Teach for America, 2020). The program welcomed college graduates already in their careers and recent college graduates and placed them in high-needed areas to teach (Thomas, 2018). As noted by Backes et al. (2019), the Teach for America program found success in its selection methods. One successful plan was to strategically place candidates in schools (Backes et al., 2019). The program was piloted in Miami, FL, and credited for school turnaround. Not long after the program's success in Miami surfaced came a partnership with the Miami-Dade County school system. A separate office of the State Education Department was appointed to manage the merge (Backes et al., 2019). According to Teach for America (2020), upwards of 42,000 alternatively certified TFA teachers serve in 52 regions.

According to Chambers (2017), TFA placed teachers in low-income schools for two years. When the probationary years were over, TFA teachers could move on to a different school of their choosing (Donaldson & Johnson, 2019). Data reported that more than 60% of TFA

teachers stayed in teaching past the required two years (Donaldson & Johnson, 2019). However, the total number of teachers who have passed through TFA and have remained in teaching is not currently available (Teach for America, 2020). According to Evertson and Weinstein (2006), some teachers who entered teaching through TFA and stayed in teaching past the first years attributed their success to improvements made regarding their job satisfaction. Donaldson and Johnson (2019) added that other TFA teachers stayed in their new careers beyond the probationary years because they either had ample support or came from an educational background and had some experience before accepting the position. According to Moore (2018), teachers from the Teach For America program who stayed beyond their second year credited the program for their job satisfaction and student achievement success. Teach For America candidates also noted that continuous mentorship they received during their tenure in the program and that continued even after becoming gainfully employed helped them become more comfortable and successful in the classroom (Moore, 2018). Teach For America recruited candidates from prestigious and less reputable colleges and universities. The main objective of the program was to identify graduates with degrees in programs other than education (Clement, 2018). The Teach for America initiative, which was once called The New Teacher Project, has brought into alternative certification pathways that are outside of the realm of formal teacher training programs (Bos & Gerdeman, 2017).

Montgomery College and the Montgomery County Public Schools in Alabama came together to form The Alternative Certification for Effective Teachers Program (ACET) (Corcillo & Allen, 2018). This partnership appealed more so to the adult and head of household career changers. The program offered courses that led to certification in the evenings leaving interested

candidates free to operate in daily commitments outside of school. Candidates in the program highly recommended the program because what candidates deemed the most valuable aspect of the program being taught how to teach (Corcillo & Allen, 2018).

Career and technical education programs are systems that offer courses that lead directly to employment at an abbreviated pace. Career and technical education (CTE) programs provided learners from middle school to adulthood with meaningful, career-driven learning. Most teachers employed in CTE programs possessed an alternative teaching license themselves. CTE programs hired alternatively certified teachers because they had a myriad of experience in technical skills and knowledge of the work world. Their experience exceeds their formal training to succeed in their future career and encourages lifelong learning (Franklin, 2020). When the teacher shortages hit schools, the U.S. Department of Education reported that several states, including the District of Columbia, sought other channels for staffing their facilities. The demand for CTE teachers grew greater when enrollment in career and technical schools increased (Stephens, 2015).

Almost every high school offers courses in courses categorized as CTE. Courses that fall under CTE include business, health science, technology, finance, and STEM (Franklin, 2020). The initiation of career and technical education programs opened another door for the alternatively certified educator (Devier, 2019). The provision of alternative routes to teacher certification served to be a useful tool to address the recruitment and retention of teachers (Rowland-Woods, 2016).

Shortages in high need subject areas, low numbers of male teachers and culturally and linguistically diverse teacher candidates, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) highly qualified teacher-related requirements have pushed the need for the proliferation of alternative

routes certification. In certain critical subject areas like STEM education, a curriculum based on the four specific disciplines — science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, faces an inadequate supply. Also, special education certified teachers and rural regions, in general, show even more severe shortages. Under the context of shortages in these kinds of high needs areas beginning in the 1980s, policymakers in many states and school districts enacted alternative certification routes to meet teachers' growing demand. In recent years, alternative certification routes are just as significantly in need as traditional teacher preparation programs throughout the United States. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) subscribed that alternative certification programs should become a central focus given the proliferation of teacher shortage (Whitford et al., 2018). As a fast response to teacher shortages, states developed alternative certification pathways that allowed teachers to start teaching while working towards a teaching license (Wheless, 2019). The alternative certification pathway is another track that professionals with a non-education-related degree can enter teaching (Moore, 2018).

Alternative certification has been a topic of discussion since early in the 1980s (Ludlow, 2018). States impacted by teacher turnover took advantage of teacher licensing's optional route (Redding & Smith, 2016). According to Rose (2019), alternative certification was the first step to filling the teacher shortage gap. Once the teacher assumed the role, he or she was expected to teach and simultaneously pursue full certification through college courses (Ludlow, 2018). In the 1980s, only a few states adopted alternative certification, but by 2003, more than 40 states offered the alternative as a route to teaching (Ludlow, 2018). Additionally, 144 different certification routes were active that stretched beyond the original model, which was through college courses (Ludlow, 2018). By 2007, every state offered numerous variations of alternative

certification routes, and 485 models were reportedly in use across the country (Ludlow, 2018). The 2019 National Center for Education Statistics report noted that more than 675,000 teachers were teaching under alternative certification during the 2015-16 school year (Mulvihill & Martin, 2019).

### **Alternative Licensure**

Alternative licensure is the process used by school districts and state education departments to certify those individuals who do not hold an undergraduate degree in education from a teacher preparation program (Devier, 2019). The alternative certification was implemented as a possible solution to eliminating the teacher shortage (Etheredge, 2015). According to Devier (2019), traditional teacher training routes are not the only choices schools need of educators are searching out. The definition and synopsis of teacher preparation have evolved. Once defined as four years of education coursework at the baccalaureate level, teacher preparation broadened the range of wide-ranging assortments of paths across the United States. A master's degree or classroom experience is no longer mandatory for obtaining a teaching position in some schools or districts. Some schools and district offices have been willing to promote providing on-the-job training, mentorship, and professional development courses as an added incentive to candidates (Devier, 2019).

Legislators embraced the alternative certification licensing initiative to address teacher retention even though it was experimental (Ludlow, 2013). When the innovative teacher pathway opened, school districts took advantage and hired second-career educators and placed them in schools with high-need areas (Ludlow, 2013). According to Devier (2019), candidates and hiring personnel embraced the alternative certification route wholeheartedly because it met the needs on

both sides of the table. According to Bertrand (2019), second-career educators possessed high-quality job performance in their new careers, which resulted from previous job experience. Additionally, Bertrand (2019) noted that policymakers encouraged hiring personnel to bring these successful professionals into their schools as teachers because of their distinguishing attributes, work competencies, and leadership and management skills. As reported by second-career educators, the one reservation about alternative certification was the absence of preservice classroom experience. However, the promise of on-the-job training and professional development support was enough to garner interest and reassurance to sign on (Devier, 2019). The Alternative Certification for Teachers-ACT was enacted to attract professionals from other careers and lead them to bring their skills into the classroom (Stelly, 2020). The Alternative Certification for Teachers-ACT was introduced in 2004 to attract professionals from different occupations (Sawchuk, 2013). According to Schmidt et al. (2020), alternative certification is a state accreditation granted to college graduates who want to teach but have no teacher education. As noted by DiCicco et al. (2019), one alternative certification program led to a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree. The MAT program is like a traditional teacher preparation route but certifies a second-career educator much faster (DiCicco et al., 2019). Professionals from other careers, curious about teaching, concluded that the alternative approach to certification was an economical and workable recourse (Banks, 2016). According to Banks (2016), the alternative route's goal was to certify professionals while they assumed the full-time position and worked closely with an experienced teacher or mentor. As Renbarger and Davis (2019) ascertained, when school districts provided comprehensive support to their new teachers, the outcome was the teacher's desire to leave teaching diminished.

In more than 14 states, an alternative certification means that a candidate with a degree in an area other than education can accept a teacher's paid position (Brenner et al. 2015; Chambers, 2017). While candidates go on to further their studies in education, such as pursuing a master's degree, they can earn a decent wage teaching or as a long-term substitute (Chambers, 2017). In Georgia and other states, a program called The Alternative Certificate for Teachers Program-ACT has been introduced (Certification Map, 2019; Chambers, 2017). It was created in 2004 to attract professionals from other careers and lead them to bring their skills into the classroom as teachers (Sawchuk, 2013). The alternative certification program offered flexibility and a cohort-style learning model that allowed professionals to receive renewable certificates after year one and master's degrees in year two (Sawchuk, 2013). According to Bowen et al. (2019), another bonus of the alternative certification program was the low cost.

Some states used a scaled-down version of alternative certification for teaching dating back to before the 1990s when the teacher retention problem began raising eyebrows (Stanton, 2017; Teaching Certification.com, 2020; Zinger, 2018). Since that time, some alternative certification variation has become widely recognized as a valid initiative (Chambers, 2017). According to Rose (2019), what set this alternative route to teaching apart from the traditional way were the options for teaching. Alternatively certified educators may obtain a teaching position with either a bachelor's degree in a field outside of education or enroll in a master's in teaching program (Bowling & Ball, 2018). A second option to solidifying a teaching position was to enroll in accelerated classes while receiving on-the-job experiences and mentoring (Zirkle, 2019). A third way to teach without all the credentials needed was to work for less pay than a certified teacher while gaining certification (Teaching Certification.com, 2020).

In contrast to taking accelerated classes, other ways to teach through the alternative route included taking and passing an entrance exam (Stelly, 2020). Stelly (2020) pointed out that school districts and hiring sources allowed candidates to bypass taking the entrance exams in some cases. The National Council on Teacher Quality (2017) noted that the requirement to be alternatively certified in some states was to have a four-year degree. School districts did not enforce the need for education-related coursework. The criteria for alternative certification licensure varied from state to state and allowed some states the freedom to create their solutions for preparing and supporting second-career educators (Greenberg et al., 2014). In Texas, the requirements for teaching under an alternative license are not as flexible (Stelly, 2020). Stelly (2020) added that the second-career educator must complete required training programs, take an examination, or agree to become part of a cohort.

As of 2010, 48 states, including Washington DC, accepted and promoted an alternate route to teacher certification (Chambers, 2017). Additionally, the National Center for Education Information (NCEI) approximated that upwards of 250,000 teachers entered teaching through one of the options previously mentioned (Hohnstein, 2017; Teaching Certification.com, 2020). A survey taken in 2017 reported that more than 500 alternative certification initiatives existed in America (Chambers, 2017). School districts and hiring personnel adapting additional licensing programs created diversity in teaching staff and strengthened the candidate pool (Shuls & Trivitt, 2015). Whitford et al. (2018) reported that as much as one-third of all hires across the United States hold or began teaching with an alternative license.

According to Scott (2019), there is a growing ideology that black students may thrive and reach their academic potential if more black men were their teachers. As the demographics

continue to shift and change, so does the public-school population. Today, minority students represent approximately 50% of the national K-12 population. It is projected that by 2024, the minority student population will be at 56% (Jones et al., 2019). Talks centered on alternative teacher preparation programs as ways to recruit minority professionals are ongoing. Discussions and data collection support the claim that minority students who see more teachers of color in their schools and experience more culturally responsive teaching models are effective for student achievement (Scott, 2019).

Efforts to bring more black male professionals into teaching through alternative certification resulted in forming a new alternative. The additional pathway created by educational leaders was called the Call Me MISTER (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models) program (Scott, 2019). According to Jones et al. (2019), the Call Me MISTER program was formed in early 2000. The alliance was formed between three private historically black institutions based on its headquarters at Clemson University. Clemson University, as previously stated, was formed to execute a model in which minority students saw people like themselves represented among the faculty and staff (Jones et al., 2019).

South Carolina was the first state to push the minority teacher retention program (Scott, 2019). Additionally, South Carolina's educational policymakers noted that recruiting and retaining minority teachers was possible because of targeted strategies. Early reports of the program's success that all program graduates remained in the education field spread to other states such as Massachusetts and California. There are now Call Me MISTER programs in Boston and Oakland, as well as seven other states. Recent studies continue to document the high percentages of black men matriculating through the program. The demographics continue to

shift. As the demographics change, so does the public-school population. Today, minority students represent approximately 50% of the national K-12 population (Scott, 2019).

### **Definition of Alternative Certification and Licensure**

An alternative license is an issued document from a state education department (Devier, 2019). This document certifies a candidate with no education background to be employed as a teacher (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Butler (2018) defined alternative teacher certification as any teacher preparation program outside of a traditional undergraduate program leading to certification or licensure. An alternative certificate has time constraints and needs to be renewed similar to a regular teaching license (Devier, 2019). Unlike traditional certificates, an alternative license allows individuals from careers outside of teaching to quickly bring their professional skills into the classroom (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

The indicators of a teaching candidate with alternative teacher certification include candidates that did not complete a traditional educator preparation program but held a degree in another field (Gelfer et al., 2015). Alternatively certified educators can, while teaching, continue to complete a pathway to earning a license to teach in a content area relative to their original field of study (Wheless, 2019). Not all alternative certification programs are the same (Devier, 2019). Additionally, the certification programs in place undergo constant revision and updating (Devier, 2019). What is true is that an alternative certificate allows the individual to teach without matriculating through traditional education certification pathways to become a teacher (Gelfer et al., 2015).

Teacher shortages in technical areas continued to surface across the country. Understandably, the pressure to fill vacancies weighs heavy on the school leader's minds

(Devier, 2019). Apprehensions with the diminishing population of teachers of specialized subjects has prompted a clarion call to state and federal education departments. The US Department of Education alerted that the increasing shortage in specialized education areas would affect economics and national security if not addressed (McConnell, 2017). According to Devier (2019), technical subjects in education across the country maintained a high-need area and widened the teacher shortage (Devier, 2019). McConnell (2017) concluded that issues with a lack of diversity in teacher knowledge of technical subjects increased and needed policies that reflected differentiation. Aragon (2016) added and forecasted that education on a national level would continue to lack in areas of societal, technological advancement, and preparation for career success in a changing world if teacher shortages in these areas remained unaddressed.

To address the teacher shortage in technical subjects, the state of Ohio granted four-year teaching licenses known as an Alternative Resident Educator license. Teachers who were willing to teach in career and specialized education areas were the ones who took advantage of the alternative license (Ohio Department of Education, 2018a). The program, previously called the "Route B option" at its inception, made it possible for professionals with the required expertise to teach the career-centered subject matter. State education departments implemented the alternative resident license during the 2011 – 2012 school year. Programs like the Ohio Resident Educator program accelerated interest in career and technical education studies (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

As per Ranly (2019), human resource personnel sought to relax the requirements for teaching by introducing alternative certifications to retain new teachers and reduce their frustrations with the process. Some early requirements for candidates who chose the alternative

certification route were as simple and non-demanding as to enroll in a state-provided teacher certification program and or become connected to an experienced mentor teacher (Butler, 2018). Other relaxed requirements included completing specific licensure requirements (such as taking one education-related course per semester, rather than the full gamut that traditional teacher education programs required (Ranly, 2019). Some hiring agencies required the new teacher to complete the approved program of study associated with an accredited college or university within the first four years of teaching (Zirkle et al., 2019). Alternative certification programs attracted many who sought to change careers—the participants in the programs graduated with non-education degrees (Rose, 2019).

Several alternatively certified programs are available throughout the country (Devier, 2019). The alternative certification programs attracted those who changed jobs or graduated with non-education degrees to the field (Rose, 2019). Once in the programs, these individuals were praised for their talent, offered positions near their homes, and were initially given practical training (Doney, 2013). Brown (2019) reported that in addition to the praise and recognition alternatively certified educators experienced from building personnel, they also had opportunities to participate in in-house professional development and university-provided coursework while teaching. The in-house professional development was specialized and geared towards making up for what candidates missed in the traditional journey (Doney, 2013).

In later years Brown (2019) reported that hiring alternatively certified educators reduced the vacancies in hard-to-staff schools. When the Alternative Certification Program (ACP) and traditional teacher certification programs are compared, according to Stelly (2020), practices such as core content knowledge and pedagogical practices are closely mirrored. These areas are

relevant practices of effective classroom teaching (Hollins, 2011; Kane et al., 2008). Due to the flexible nature of ACPs and their attempt to meet student populations' diverse needs, there is variance in length of programs, credit hours needed, whether the instruction was online or face-to-face. Differences also occurred in the type of content, the intensity of the program's focus area, the classroom management techniques, and the instructional practices covered. In the areas of classroom management and instruction, ACP programs vary in the type of coursework and the philosophies around those two approaches (Greenberg et al., 2014).

There is subtle variance in the structure of alternative certification initiatives across the landscape of the American education system (Bowling & Ball, 2018; Rose, 2019). The influx of alternative certification initiatives helped reduce the teacher shortage, but the variations in qualifications and program delivery have created inconsistencies (Devier, 2019; Rose, 2019). According to Dye (2017), written new policy statements reflect an emphasis on program regulations. Additionally, research showed that the variance that existed across the country among these alternative paths to teacher certification were mainly in the areas of the required coursework and the length of time needed to complete the requirements and obtain full certification (Griffin, 2018). Bowling and Ball (2018) contended that some criticized these alternative certification initiatives as being ways to shorten or bypass reliable, professional pathways to certification. Others felt that the relief in the financial obligation that the program offered attracted individuals for the wrong reasons (Brown, 2019). Critics cited that the initiatives lacked rigor and possessed sub-standard quality in terms of what candidates who took this route to teacher licensure needed (Bowling & Ball, 2018). Bowling and Ball (2018) added

that some alternative certification initiatives abbreviated coverage of teaching fundamentals and required only a limited time of professional preparation.

The general perception of alternative certification was that there was a high risk involved with putting unprepared teachers into classrooms (Brown, 2019). Varied coursework requirements, length of time in training programs, a loose understanding of pedagogy, and absence of teacher assessments for understanding (Griffin, 2018). Bowling and Ball (2018) asserted that the variance of coursework requirements across alternative programs was not uniform and therefore affected achievement outcomes. According to Bowen et al., (2019), the inconsistencies in coursework across programs and lack of a shared understanding of pedagogical theories are to blame for widening the gap. Bowling and Ball (2018) warned that because states mandated their amounts of time in coursework, more inconsistencies would arise. The key areas of program specification inconsistencies were: (a) applicants taught in subject areas in which they had no experience, (b) applicants entered the program with less college preparation than traditionally certified teachers, (c) applicants were allowed to complete the program with little to no pedagogical preparation, and (d) applicants were not required to pass competency examinations for licensure (Bowling & Ball, 2018).

### **Reasons Alternately Certified Teachers Stayed in Teaching**

Butler (2018) noted that approximately one out of every five new teachers is a teacher with an alternative license. When asked why they stayed in teaching past the first few years, some educators with alternative certification credited the vetting process, on-the-job training, ongoing professional development, and mentors assigned to them (Butler, 2018). According to Billingsley and Bettini (2019), social and academic safeguards that were put in place helped to

support alternatively certified teachers on the job. Bettini et al. (2018) noted that learning curriculums provided educational assurance to support alternatively certified teachers. Morgan (2018) added that the learning curriculums provided a social comfortability level with teaching new or unfamiliar content. Learning curriculums are scripted extended plans (Morgan, 2018). According to Morgan (2018), learning curriculums were like pacing guides and frameworks. Some districts adopted some learning curriculum variations and offered them to their teachers to use (Bowling & Ball, 2018). Alternatively, certified teachers who used the learning curriculum noted that the product was advantageous and worth noting that learning curriculums provided education and helped support alternatively certified teachers (Bettini et al., 2018).

Another safeguard to support alternatively certified teachers was the mentorship of seasoned teachers (Griffin, 2018). According to Corcillo and Allen (2018), many alternatively certified educators remained in teaching beyond their initial years. Some credited School-based support and district-provided mentorship for the high retention of second-career educators (Corcillo & Allen, 2018). These human capital approaches allowed for experienced teachers to accept the opportunity to support alternatively certified teachers on the job by breaking down the learning curriculum (Bowling & Ball, 2018). Built into the learning curriculum were opportunities to collaborate (Bettini et al., 2018). According to Bowling and Ball (2018), seasoned teachers supported alternatively certified teachers by providing emotional support and encouragement. One alternatively certified teacher reported that when she felt overwhelmed, she could reach out to a seasoned teacher for help (Bettini et al., 2018).

According to Hawkins (2017), one area hardest hit by teacher attrition is special education. Retaining teachers in this area remains challenging. Teachers with alternative

certification are, most times, encouraged to teach in this specialized area. As challenging as special areas is, Hawkins (2017) felt that better efforts to train alternatively certified teachers with interest in special education would lead to effective retention (Hawkins, 2017). Franklin (2020) noted that the National Education Association suggested proposals for recruiting and maintaining first-year teachers. The recommendations believed to alleviate teacher attrition included strengthening the partnership between preparation programs and hiring entities, firming up the candidate selection and screening, nurturing mentor support while teaching, and utilizing a user-friendly curriculum (Franklin, 2020; Werth, 2019). Nelson (2020) added that mentoring programs effectively supported first-year teachers and helped struggling teachers manage tough situations. According to Franklin (2020), programs that involved mentoring boosted teacher retention.

The mentorship of alternatively certified educators by experienced teachers is vital to their success (Gordon & Parham, 2019). Poole (2018) noted that a critical concept for alternatively certified teacher retention was the presence of job satisfaction. Bowling and Ball (2018) indicated that alternatively certified teachers embraced opportunities to gather with other educators to unpack curriculum resources. Stelly (2020) added that second-career educators thrived on the active and immediate feedback they received on their first careers and welcomed it in their second careers. Hennissen et al. (2011) performed a study with new teachers and their mentors to determine how useful and needed feedback was. Hennissen et al. (2011) identified that many new teachers embraced the input as a valuable form of emotional support from the mentors. The researcher also determined that more new teachers thrived with mentorship and social-emotional support at their disposal (Stelly, 2020). Research continued to justify that

mentoring was a valuable asset that built self-confidence and self-efficacy in new teachers while strengthening knowledge of the curriculum (Campbell, 2017).

According to Watkins (2019), school districts aimed to provide mentorship opportunities as part of the plan to increase job satisfaction. Poole (2018) added that the pool of available candidates would increase if mentorship were an incentive mentioned at the time of hire. As foretasted, a mentor instilled a sense of preparedness in new teachers by providing emotional support and immediate feedback (Hennissen et al., 2011; Stelly, 2020). Two other supports new teachers hailed as noteworthy were administrator and colleague support. Novice teachers mentioned that hearing encouragement from those professionals daily made the transition into teaching positive for them (Stelly, 2020). Poole (2018) concluded that alternatively certified teachers who experienced job satisfaction would most likely not move around or out of the district in search of better employment.

### **Characteristics of Second-career Educators**

Butler (2018) echoed other researchers' findings regarding commonalities among second-career educators. Besides being career changers, these now turned educators under alternative certification, shared several similarities. Second-career educators shared some similarities because of their educational backgrounds and that their previous jobs were often in specialized or content-specific areas like math, science, music, or art. Some studies showed that alternatively certified educators were mostly male. Other studies noted that many alternatively educators were of minority descent (Butler, 2018; Rose & Sughrue, 2020; Wheelless, 2019).

A survey conducted among candidates who chose the alternative path to teach determined they possessed a strong sense of efficacy (Spencer, 2019). Other studies showed that retaining

alternatively certified teachers in schools significantly impacted the workplace (Watkins, 2019; Zinger, 2018). According to Banks (2016), it was determined that second-career educators played an integral part in closing the achievement gap to a higher degree than traditionally trained teachers due to their diverse backgrounds. A divergent background in both experience and training in pedagogy existed between teachers on the alternative certification path and those that came to teaching via the traditional pathway (Wheless, 2019). Thomas (2018) concurred alternatively certified teachers outperformed their traditionally trained counterparts with similar levels of experience. Principals of schools with second-career educators took advantage of this trend and gladly utilized the alternatively certified teachers' wealth of experiences (Brenner et al., 2015).

Brenner et al. (2015) reported the positives these professionals brought to their respective schools as (1) practical classroom management skills, (2) the ability to accept and grow from constructive criticism, and (3) knowledge of business practices. Stephens (2015) settled that their attitudes, shaped by real-life experiences and expectations, rubbed off on their students because of the second-career educators' industry knowledge. Second-career educators possessed a career-minded edge of proficiency that traditionally trained teachers lacked. In the state of Michigan, industry experts are most welcome to teach in middle school, high school, and community colleges under an alternative teaching certificate (Stephens, 2015). The leadership skills second-career teachers brought to the workplace have enhanced the level of professionalism in some schools (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Washington, 2016).

### **Policy Makers**

Teacher turnover has spread over many states and remains as a critical problem (Pircon, 2019). Carver-Thomas (2018) reported that the state with the highest teacher turnover in 2017 was Arizona, while Utah had the lowest. To date, 45 states have endured policy changes connected with teacher shortage (Pircon, 2019; Zinger, 2018). Alternative teacher certification was developed to quickly place teachers in classrooms while at the same time reducing the requirement of completing a four-year undergraduate education program (Wheless, 2019). Lawmakers and educational stakeholders have encouraged the development of alternative certification programs to address teacher turnover in high poverty and high minority schools and districts (Schmidt et al., 2020; Zirkle, 2019).

According to Chambers (2017), policymakers have taken extra steps to ensure that alternatively certified teachers experience job satisfaction. Policymakers believe that the pool of available candidates will increase (Chambers, 2017). They also think that with job satisfaction, second-career educators will not move around or out of the district searching for employment they feel better suits them (Rose, 2019). As Poole (2018) further noted, policymakers can enhance the likelihood of retaining alternatively certified teachers by funneling more money into preparation programs that run before and concurrent with employment. Policymakers will reap the benefit of less turnover and longer teacher retention if job satisfaction becomes a priority (Poole, 2018; Rose, 2019).

### **Contributions of Alternative Certification**

One focus of alternative certification programs is to provide teaching status to professionals at an accelerated greater than that of traditionally trained candidates in teacher-preparation programs (Mentzer et al., 2019). Since the inception of alternative teacher

certification programs, there has been a steady and marked increase in various pathways to teacher certification nationwide. What began as a practice by eight states in the 1980s, by 2003, was the practice of 46 states (Wheeless, 2019). According to Etheredge (2015), second-career educator employment has risen since the first approved alternative certification program. As the name alternative suggests, standards may vary by state. Still, all alternative certification pathways generally do not require a bachelor's degree in education or the added prerequisite of student teaching or an internship to begin working towards certification (Wheeless, 2019).

Some alternative certification routes to teaching projected to ease teacher shortages included fast-track licensing and coursework (Mentzer et al., 2019). Almost all states have an alternative certification program for teachers (Wheeless, 2019). For example, Arkansas has multiple pathways to alternative certification, and as a result, 28 percent of the teachers in Arkansas between 2014 and 2015 were alternatively certified. Their multiple pathways to certification include university-led programs, privatized programs, and a state-sponsored program known as the Arkansas Professional Pathway to Educator Licensure (APPEL) (Wheeless, 2019). School districts and state education departments have turned to non-traditional initiatives to counteract widespread teacher shortages (Moore, 2018). Moore (2018) noted that close to one-third of recently hired educators entered teaching by one of the numerous alternative licensure pathways. Statistics cited in current, relevant literature appear to support the contention that these alternative programs are thriving. Approximately 25 percent of teachers today entered the field through alternative means (Wheeless, 2019).

Texas Education Agency noted a rise in university-based alternative programs (Etheredge, 2015; Harmon, 2016). Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015) launched a

comprehensive study to determine how well alternative certification induction programs prepared candidates for the classroom. Evidence supported that the second-career professionals possessed social skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills in addition to academic skills (Haim & Amdur, 2016). Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015) concluded that alternatively certified educators developed their academic and social skills in their undergraduate studies or first career.

Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015) weighed in on the impact of building-level initiatives. Rose (2019) noted that building-level initiatives positively impacted alternative certification (Rose, 2019). The building-level initiatives that were mentioned were professional development, collaboration, and peer support (Zinger, 2018). Some second-career educators chimed in, reckoning that the added incentive of more support and guidance and less evaluative and supervisory pressure that school-based leadership provided effectively attracted and kept them in teaching (Moore, 2018). Renbarger and Davis (2019) concluded that providing professional development for alternatively certified teachers proved to be highly effective in promoting teachers' efficacy. Carter et al. (2019) concluded that increased building-level support and added interventions for new teachers could promote job satisfaction and significantly impact new teacher retention in the future.

Rose (2019) noted that school leadership teams, through building-level support initiatives, provided practical help to alternatively certified teachers. The support school leadership teams provided to alternatively certified teachers resembled traditionally trained teachers' support through induction (Driscoll, 2008). Driscoll further suggested that mentoring, collaboration, coaching initiatives combined with professional development will impact new

teacher retention in the future (2008). In addition to coursework, candidates can be empowered through in-service sessions and student teaching (Ring, 2016). In-service and student teaching and the most common requirements for the traditional track to licensure (Ring, 2016; Shuls & Trivitt, 2015; Zinger, 2018).

In other states, alternative certification programs received praise for eliminating the teacher shortage dilemma (Donitsa-Schmidt & Zuzovsky, 2016; Zinger, 2018). Additionally, more minority teachers, particularly in short supply, fill vacancies because of alternative certification (Gracia, 2015; Hohnstein, 2017). According to Gracia (2015), in Mississippi, more than half of the teacher workforce was minority second-career educators in 2005. In New York, more African American and Hispanic men with alternative certification were hired and placed in schools (Gracia, 2015). To their credit, second-career educators with backgrounds in math and science fields are in demand. They are said to have the skills needed for 21st-century career readiness (Schmidt et al., 2020). According to McElroy (2019), alternatively certified teachers enabled student achievement with the same success as the traditionally certified teachers. Morettini (2014) contended that referring individuals with degrees outside of education to pursue an interest in teaching through alternative certification produced positive results.

An additional benefit of alternative certification initiatives is that second-career educators have addressed the burgeoning need for educators as immigration rates to the United States expanded at higher rates than average (Hohnstein, 2017). Hohnstein (2017) held that the high immigration rate leads to a rapidly increasing diverse student population. Fortunately, the increasingly diverse student population warranted an equally diverse teacher population (Zirkle, 2019). Alternative certification was the conduit pathway (Redding & Smith, 2016). The diversity

among second careers educators was beneficial to principals and school districts whose clientele were increasingly diverse (Hohnstein, 2017).

According to Bettini et al. (2018), experts viewed alternatively certified educators as well-adjusted to teaching (Gelfer et al., 2015). Administrators observed that alternatively certified educators eased into the teaching culture without any reservations (Haim & Amdur, 2016). Administrators added that these professionals were used to shared leadership and collective responsibilities (Rose, 2019). Bettini et al. (2018) noted that fellow educators accepted and welcomed second-career educators. Second-career educators were hailed by their colleagues for taking the lead with collaboration (Gelfer et al., 2015).

As noted by Gelfer et al. (2015), second-career educators were influential in areas where some traditionally trained teachers were weak. Bos and Gerdeman (2017) cautioned the need for being selective in hiring candidates from the growing pool to fill a vacancy. Researchers suggested that school districts selectively choose candidates for employment in their efforts to increase teacher quality. Bos and Gerdeman (2017) added that school districts could feel comfortable selecting candidates from the alternatively certified pool because of their previous professional experience. Lewis-Spector (2016) believes that should teacher shortages increase, and enrollment in traditional programs dwindle, more significant dependence on alternatively certified candidates is inevitable. (Lewis-Spector (2016) also noted all sources need to work in tandem with each other to meet state regulations for alternative certification.

### **Drawbacks of Alternative Certification**

Retaining teachers in inner-city schools past the first five years has been an ongoing dilemma for principals, school districts, and policymakers (DiCicco et al., 2019). Johnson (2011)

stated that the new teacher must meet challenging demands in the face of unruly students, anxious parents, and evaluative administrators. The requirements are hard to achieve for teachers from teacher preparation programs and doubly tricky for teachers from alternatively certified programs (LoCascio et al., 2016). This dilemma has led to the hiring of untrained and non-licensed professionals (Zirkle et al., 2019). Second-career professionals received alternative certification, through school districts, and entered the classroom (DiCicco et al., 2019; Harmon 2016). In several cases, alternatively certified candidates assumed the new role with limited vetting because the volume of vacancies was overwhelming (Moore, 2018).

According to Sawchuk (2013), the alternative certification for teacher's initiative was an answer to the diminishing teacher pool. Unknowingly, the ACT program may have created a new problem, leaving principals, hiring personnel, and fellow teachers a little uneasy about its effectiveness (Gelfer et al., 2015). Alternatively certified teachers' responses were mixed (Rose, 2019). In recent years, second-career teachers have been placed in the classroom to address the teacher shortage (Zinger, 2018). Some felt that the alternative certification did not measure up to the highly qualified requirements as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Bowen et al., 2019).

According to Moore (2018), to address the lack of preparedness among alternatively certified educators, some state education departments have become more stringent in their requirements for teaching under alternative certification. In addition to a four-year degree, some entities require the passing of basic skills tests, the passing of licensure exams, or a transcript that reveals content-specific coursework to enter the classroom as a certified teacher (Moore, 2018). While some feel this route opened the door for teacher unpreparedness, others supported the

initiative and stated that accepting professionals from outside of education broadened the candidate pool (Gelfer et al., 2015).

### **Proposed Updates to Alternative Certification**

According to some seasoned teachers and administrators, induction programs may need to adjust to the realities of what is happening in the field (Doney, 2013). A suggestion is that pre-service teachers learn, in their training, information on the changing risk factors that alternatively certified teachers are likely to receive during their initial years of teaching (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Doney, 2013). While pre-service training may help prepare the teacher with an education background, the teacher who is alternatively certified misses this safeguard. Many believe that the quality of training should override attention given to searches for alternative ways to certify teachers (Pazyura, 2015). Those who support the traditional certification of teachers insist that the improvement of education quality depends on professional knowledge and competencies (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Pazyura, 2015).

Brown and Militello (2016) settled that alternative certification programs should increase their efforts to prepare new teachers for life in the classroom. Suggestions for supporting alternatively certified educators included extending support beyond the first two years. Additionally, schools, school districts, and alternative certification programs should continue to work collaboratively beyond the hiring phase. Through research, Rose and Sughrue (2020) determined that some school leaders lacked empathy for alternatively certified educators. Other school leaders felt compassion but did not know how to support new teachers in ways they needed. Understandably, school leaders felt helpless in the effort to support new teachers.

Arguably, they did not have to lack the necessary tools to help first-year teachers (Rose & Sughrue, 2020).

Brown and Militello (2016) shared efforts that they learned about to engage school leaders in their individual professional development simultaneously as new teachers. Some believe that as teachers and their respective leaders matriculate through valuable professional development, they will receive the training and support needed, and teacher quality and retention in the profession will rise (Rose & Sughrue, 2020). Donitsa-Schmidt and Zuzovsky (2016) pinpointed the areas of immediate needs of alternatively certified teachers. They revealed that the types of support alternatively certified teachers desired were merely a relationship. New teachers added that while more modeling, clearer expectations, and immediate feedback were helpful, they needed most for their leader to take a personal interest in their day-to-day experiences. While some viewed efforts to support alternatively certified educators through the first few years as counterproductive, Rose and Sughrue (2020) contended these collaborative efforts would successfully help and keep the alternative accredited teachers.

According to Foote et al. (2011), one school district in New York City took the time to examine their induction policies and practices for new alternatively certified mathematics teachers. The results led to strengthening the systems of induction to support candidates in the field. Another result of the induction and policy practices was the introduction of ongoing evaluations (Foote et al., 2011). An article written by McNulty and Fox reported on the success of one survey system given to new and seasoned teachers throughout their teaching careers. The surveys provided valuable feedback on where the breakdown occurred (McNulty & Fox, 2010).

Suggestions for further research will focus on the effect of carefully designed pedagogical interventions on beginning teachers' workplace learning (Zinger, 2018). Another idea is adding collaborative models of professional development that engage teachers in joint inquiry about teaching and offer promising perspectives (Consuegra et al., 2014). According to studies, there is still a question of whether it will be possible to keep teachers who have not had valuable student teaching or are receiving support in schools to balance working and learning (Consuegra et al., 2014).

The Texas Education Agency, according to data, confirmed a rise in university-based alternative programs (Etheredge, 2015; Harmon, 2016). Research suggested some alternatively certified educators stayed in teaching past the first five years despite little to no education training or background (Butler, 2018; Chambers, 2017). Research also proposed that one of the reasons alternatively certified educators stayed in teaching past the first five years was the school-based professional development provided to them (Butler, 2018). Additionally, another reason why alternatively certified educators stayed in teaching past the first years, according to Chambers (2017), was the school-based and district-level initiatives that led to their job satisfaction. Helms-Lorenz and Maulana (2016) and Sciuchetti and Yssel (2019) believed it was the self-efficacy alternatively certified educators possessed that enabled them to stay in teaching. Other sources such as Poole (2018), Cochran-Smith, and Villegas (2015) credited mentorship and academic and social skills they acquired in their undergraduate studies or first career to rise in alternatively certified educators' retention. It is known that alternative certification programs are still in existence today (DiCicco et al., 2019).

## Summary

This chapter introduced the proposed research study centered on the perspectives of alternatively certified educators in elementary schools. In the past, keeping new teachers in schools beyond the first few years had been a challenge for many years (Bowen et al., 2019; Brown, 2019; Devier, 2019). According to Etheredge (2015), in recent years, second-career educator employment rose since the first approved alternative certification program. Several studies demonstrated the effectiveness of alternative certification, but few studies delved into alternatively certified educators' lived experiences (Brenner et al., 2015; Brown, 2019; Chambers, 2017; Thomas, 2018). The gap in research still exists. There is much information left to be known: (a) How do second-career educators experience the alternative certification initiative? (b) What unforeseen outcomes does alternative certification produce for second-career educators? (c) How do second-career educators transition from the first career to a teaching career? (d) What value do second-career educators put on their experience with alternative certification? Answers to these questions may contribute to a more comprehensive view of the alternative certification experience.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina. Chapter Three of this study describes the structure and methods used for data collection and analysis related to a phenomenological design. This chapter includes design, research questions, setting, participants, researcher's role, data collection procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness sections. Ethical considerations will follow, and a summary will close out the chapter.

### **Design**

A phenomenological design was chosen for this study to bring about a deeper understanding of the teachers' experiences as alternatively certified educators. The phenomenological approach of qualitative research was best suited to explore the perspective of second-career professionals in education. It spotlighted the rich, multi-faceted firsthand experiences of alternatively certified educators from the perspective of those who have lived it. Using this approach allows me to explore participants' firsthand views and learn about complex processes as the participants have experienced them.

Phenomenology is the method of analyzing a person's life experiences based on their direct account (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology produces an accurate understanding of the phenomenon, which can only be delivered by someone who lived it and has firsthand knowledge. This study followed a

phenomenological design using interviews, a focus group, and archival records for data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Harmon, 2016).

Interviews provided clarification and allowed for the depth of knowledge and a rich understanding of the lived experiences of each participant. Focus groups provided observations of participants while in a group setting. The focus group was also a way to determine the social-emotional tone of the participants' mindsets and experiences. Surveys were distributed among the focus group and analyzed to provide a direction for further dialog (Bland & Tobbell, 2015). As per Creswell and Poth (2018), data collected from purposively sampled participants reveal patterns and themes that further strengthen the phenomenon.

The nature of qualitative research has evolved from merely researching and describing a selected population's lived experiences to revealing more profound underlying phenomena at work in the lived experience. This study revealed some underlying reasons alternatively certified teachers stay in education past the first five years (Etheredge, 2015). Uncovering this knowledge may help direct administrators and school districts to implement changes that retain alternatively certified teachers long-term. This study presented the experiences of alternatively certified educators who stayed in teaching past the first five years and were informed of their contributions to closing teacher retention. Additional clarity was provided regarding what is known about the process of obtaining alternative certification.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this phenomenological study:

**Central Question:** How do alternatively certified educators describe their experiences and perceptions of the teaching profession in the first five years?

**Sub-Question One:** How has self-efficacy given the second-career educator an advantage?

**Sub-Question Two:** What outcome expectations did second-career educators experience?

**Sub-Question Three:** How do participants describe the benefits of participating in an alternative certification path to a new career as teachers?

### **Setting**

The setting of this phenomenological study was public schools situated in an urban school district in South Carolina. The population between the three public schools selected for the study were 1,750 students with an ethnic breakdown of 30% Black, 30% Caucasian, 30% Hispanic, and 10% Asian. These schools were chosen for this study because of their ethnically and socio-economic diverse student population, staff ethnical diversity, and faculty ethnical diversity. The three selected schools underwent numerous changes in recent years. Migration, immigration, and business growth changed the schools' financial, physical, and social dynamics. The school leaders of these selected schools experienced high teacher turnover and looked to higher alternatively certified teachers to fill vacancies. Acronyms were used to provide anonymity and protect the identity of the schools.

The racial demographic breakdown of the student population in each school was as follows:

- 30% Black, 30% Caucasian, 25% Hispanic, and 15% Asian in ABC
- 50% Black, 40% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, and 2% Asian in EFG
- 35% Black, 35% Caucasian, 20% Hispanic, and 10% Asian in IJK

Of the 650 students in ABC, more than 90% of them received free or reduced lunch. All 550 students at school EFG and 550 students at school IJK received free and reduced lunch.

School ABC, EFG, and IJK had 30, 28, and 28 full-time teachers on staff, respectively. More than half of the 86 teachers in the three schools taught for more than ten years, and 40 teachers held degrees beyond the bachelor's level. Of the 86 teachers in the three schools, 58 were female, and 28 were male. Each school had a similar organizational leadership of a principal and two assistant principals. The three schools followed a shared leadership model. Five different languages were spoken between staff and the student population in the three schools.

### **Participants**

The sample population consisted of 11 participants who entered teaching through alternative certification. According to Bowen (2008), thematic saturation of a phenomenon by 10 to 12 participants should be sufficient. Therefore, reaching this saturation point in the thematic analysis was essential to the validity of this qualitative study. All participants experienced the phenomenon of teaching as a second profession and were a mixture of men and women 26 years and older.

The three schools chosen for this study had the highest number of alternatively certified teachers in the district. The sampling design was a purposeful, criterion sampling where all participants in the sample had at least five years' experience teaching under an alternative license (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2001). The district was asked to permit principals to email a study description with a link to sign digital informed consent (see Appendix B) to teachers. Teachers who determined they fit the criteria of the study and were willing to participate became part of the study. After receiving informed consent from potential participants via Google Form, I emailed potential participants to schedule an interview and confirm their experience with the phenomenon (see Appendix F).

I used surveys as a criterion sampling method to validate the participants' experiences as phenomenological (Palinkas et al., 2013). According to Litwin (1995), valuable surveys generate data that provides noteworthy, critical awareness of the studied phenomenon. Wiles (2019) added the more accurate the survey, the more achievable the validity.

Face validity falls under content validity (Engel et al., 2020). I employed face validity to prove how logical, suitable, and applicable the data collection instrument was. I assessed face validity through qualitative interviews with individuals and a focus group as a more comprehensive way to explore participants' perspectives and experiences. I further validated face validity through debriefing sessions, which checked for consistency and authenticity (Engel et al., 2020). Pseudonyms for participants and institutional names protected their privacy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Procedures**

The first step in this research was to obtain all necessary approvals before conducting research. I emailed the school district's superintendent's office and was redirected to the school district's chief financial officer. I requested site approval permission to interact with potential participants before seeking approval from the IRB (See Appendix A). After obtaining site approval, I was directed to forward an email request to school principals. School principals used their discretion and delivered my email request to the faculty and staff. By the school district representative, I was also required to send a follow-up email request to school principals after a few days.

Potential participants who met the criteria of having alternative certification and responded to the survey received a letter of invitation and consent forms by email (See Appendix

B). Participants were requested to sign, scan, or take pictures with a camera phone and return forms by email. Participants were given the option of bringing the original with them to the interview. After I verified that participants met the qualifications for the study, I scheduled virtual interviews with qualifying participants.

Next, I conducted interviews with a focus group. I held virtual meetings through Google Meet and face-to-face and recorded them, with permission granted. In the interview and focus group, I set aside some time to discuss participant's artifacts related to the study, such as entries from reflective journals, learning logs, and peer-coaching logs with their permission (Changhao et al., 2021; Kirpalani, 2017; Pang, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017). Finally, I performed a continuous manual analysis with all data, including taking informal notes during interviews and recording them in my reflective journal. Keeping reflective notes or memos as an additional collection method to add to my new learning and feelings about the data allowed me to develop a deeper conceptual appreciation for the data (Mahbub, 2017; Glaser, 1992; Morrow and Smith (2000). Reflective journals are also a pivotal place to return to when evaluating the usefulness of the data recorded (Horton et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2021). As an additional form of data collection, reflective journals added to the credibility and trustworthiness of this qualitative research and provided a record of the meanings derived from the data (Birks et al., 2008).

Interview and focus group data were collected with recording devices and put through a program called Transcribe. Transcribe permitted the audio to be recorded by a computer microphone and then translated into text. I played back and reviewed recordings to ensure no essential information was lost. Recorded data responses were examined in-depth as part of the analysis process. These three means of gathering data helped to allow for ideas and themes to

emerge. Finally, I analyzed the data using Moustakas's (1994) Seven Steps. Data and recordings were stored and protected by a password (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **The Researcher's Role**

As the human instrument in this proposed study, I used a moral compass, was not judgmental or biased, and was responsible for my information (Moustakas, 1994). I behaved ethically for the duration of the research and strove to be honest about my role and how I fit into the study as the researcher. I made sure to keep human participants safe and diligently worked to recognize and suppress personal bias and assumptions.

Additionally, I did not have a relationship with any participants other than working in the same school district. I served in a bridge capacity between the participants and best practices as one who is privy to their perceptions and feelings. I reported mutually agreed upon information and kept in mind that the participants' experiences were fresh and may invoke sensitivity. Additionally, I was patient with participants who showed difficulty reliving the past and committed to communicating clearly and keeping what participants shared confidential. I planned only to collect data crucial to helping alternatively certified teachers remain in teaching.

As a teacher who formally worked in corporate America, I experienced the cultural difference between the corporate world and the local school settings. I saw teachers struggle to meet the day-to-day demands of teaching content they were not adequately prepared to teach while maintaining good classroom management. I witnessed the teacher's exodus year to year. While some schools put measures in place to retain teachers, not all took the initiative. If more documentation on retaining the alternatively certified teacher population was available, it might alleviate teacher turnover.

This study enabled me to research participants' experiences in three schools where I had no personal connection. As a mentor teacher who worked with new teachers, I withheld my bias and extinguished my personal opinions of building-level practices. I included in the study only what I had consent to divulge and bracketed my personal beliefs to eliminate interference in the study.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection triangulation technique involved three data collection methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2001). The various types of data collection included interviews, a focus group, and archival records. Before collecting data, I contacted the school district's representative for permission to conduct research. Once permission to conduct my study was obtained, I gained approval to research the school district from the school district's dissertation committee. Next, I awaited permission from individual principals to have a link forwarded to teachers who were alternatively certified to learn more about the study. Finally, when all approvals were received, including IRB, I operated in the human instrument's role to gather information relevant to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I distributed and then collected signed consent slips from all participants whose criteria matched the change.

Participant interviews were recorded. A follow-up meeting with participants was suggested to give them additional opportunities to add to or refine their accounts and timelines. This process of member checking ensured the validity of my data. In addition, the participants had the opportunity to verify that I had correctly transcribed what they expressed. The same data collection procedures for individual interviews were used for focus group interactions. I gave participants the option to join the focus group in person or virtually via a link. I followed up with

participants by email or link to keep them abreast of instructions, dates, times, and locations. A professional transcriber app was used to take data from recorded interviews and focus group meetings. Again, the transcriptions were member-checked or verified with participants for accuracy.

The third data collection method was collecting or revealing participants' archival records (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polidore et al., 2010). I requested archival records, such as photos, memoranda, reflective journal entries, and logs, as a way to corroborate the participants' statements and strengthen the non-verbal cues I observed in interviews (Barnes et al., 2018; Polidore et al., 2010). Additional archival records, such as past interviews and previously generated data found on Web pages and blogs, were viewed and used to further the data resource bank (Roulston, 2019; Salamon, 2017). Archival records produce data equally rich in essence as firsthand data from interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Roulston, 2019; Salamon, 2017; Teaching Certification.com, 2021).

## **Interviews**

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology is a theory developed from a living person's perspective. Therefore, I analyzed the participant's perspective - the primary resource - to inform the present and future. Furthermore, by utilizing semi-structured interview questions, I gave the participants a platform to speak and share ideas on the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), semi-structured interview questions provided the participants with focus and allowed their elaborations to be recorded. Additionally, semi-structured interview questions (See Appendix C) allowed for adequate reporting of participants' attitudes and perceptions (Creswell, 2013).

According to Etheridge (2015), the qualitative nature of interviews reveals valuable information. For this reason, no single piece of data was discounted for fear that part of the data held the key to an underlying cause for teachers who were alternatively certified and stayed in education past the first five years (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Instead, focus group questions, and archival records were used to achieve triangulation of data for my study and interviews (Creswell, 2013; McElhaney, 2016).

Before sharing the interview questions with actual participants of this study, I piloted the interview questions with a smaller group. According to Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2002), routing the interview questions to a few people is a common practice in qualitative research. This step allowed me to brush up on my interviewing skills, strengthen my interview protocols, and identify flaws in my interview design before proceeding with my more extensive study (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). A list of questions designed to elicit alternatively certified teacher dialogue is below:

#### Standardized Initial Interview Questions

1. Please tell me your academic background and how your career led to your current position as a years?
2. What are your long-term goals in teaching?
3. Describe your personality.
4. Of the formative experiences you identified on your timeline, which would you say were the most significant?
5. What made these experiences significant?
6. What was your college experience like?

7. How would you describe the alternative certification application experience before getting placed in a school?
8. What are your suggestions for enhancing the alternative certification process?
9. How did you develop the practical skills required in the classroom setting?
10. What sparked your interest in becoming a teacher through an alternative certification route?
11. What previous experiences do you feel prepared you to teach?
12. Describe your mentoring experience in the alternative certification process.
13. What would you want to tell a newly certified second-career educator to expect to experience?
14. How would you help the next alternatively certified teacher transition to the new role?
15. What else do you think would be important for me to know about your experience as an alternatively certified educator?
16. If needed, can we meet again for follow-up? What would be your preference? E-mail, telephone, face-to-face, or virtual meet?

Question one was an introductory question. The purpose of question one was to formally let participants and the interviewer know each other (Osborne, 2018; Patton, 2015). The purpose of question two was to zero in on the participants' long-term goals (Kokiko, 2009). Question three gently opened a window into the participants' personalities and influences (Richardson-Spears, 2018). Questions four and five focused on the experiences' significances (Bertrand, 2019; Osborne, 2018). Additionally, questions four and five were straightforward and

non-threatening. The purpose for questions four and five was to help build a foundation, rapport, and a place, in the timeline to return to (Patton, 2015).

Question six asked the participants to think back to college and the program of study to pinpoint any significant experiences that may have correlated to employment in teaching as a second career (Osborne, 2018). Question seven revisited the context of significant experiences before teaching (Bertrand, 2019). Questions eight through eleven focused on the significant experiences as an alternative certified educator and helped the participants reflect on their awareness of their approach to and experience with alternative certification (Bertrand, 2019; Kokiko, 2009; Osborne, 2018).

According to McElhaney (2016), self-efficacy is defined as the ability to face challenges, persevere, and remain self-motivated. Beauchamp et al. (2019) added that self-efficacy is the capacity to take risks. Alternatively, certified educators are believed to have the type of belief in themselves or self-efficacy that the goals they set are attainable (McElhaney, 2016). Question twelve helped the participants reflect on what they drew from interactions with administration, coworkers, students, and classroom culture (Kokiko, 2009). According to Patton (2015), considering others' viewpoints and perspectives can provide new and helpful insight. Questions thirteen and fourteen put the participant in a role-playing context. The purpose of role-playing was to help the participants think more deeply and even step outside themselves.

According to Bettini et al. (2018), alternatively certified educators are viewed as experts who adjust well. Administrators observed that alternatively certified educators eased into the teaching culture and were comfortable turn-keying information (Haim & Amdur, 2016). Question fifteen and sixteen served as closing questions to give the participant a final

opportunity to add valuable information and allow the researcher to have future interviews (Green, 2015).

### **Focus Groups**

The second data collection method used was a focus group. Focus groups are strategic discussions involving participants with similar backgrounds and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of a focus group was to allow for a discussion on a specific topic, therefore deepening the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2014). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), focus groups help develop the theory. In this case, the focus group provided real-time accounts of the participants' experiences (Bickman & Rog, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The focus group process began after completed consent forms from all participants were collected. If participants were willing, then they received the link. Next, I created and sent a link for the focus group conference to take place after the interviews. After the link was sent, the focus group met virtually, using the link. Participants continued using their pseudonyms in the presence of other focus group participants (Creswell, 2013).

All second-career educator participants in the study were invited to join the focus group. The focus group answered five semi-structured questions (See Appendix D). The participants in the focus group responded to the questions using a round table style cohort (Moustakas, 1994). Each participant received an equal opportunity to share, and I, as moderator, ensured that no one person dominated the conversation or discounted any person's story. The focus group discussion was audio-recorded, and the data was transcribed. While the focus group was occurring, I recorded observations and gestures in a journal (Creswell, 2013).

When individual interviews ended, the transcripts were cross-referenced and, if needed, followed up. I proposed no compensation for participation in the focus group. Participation in the focus group was voluntary. A list of questions designed to elicit alternatively certified teacher dialogue is below:

#### Standardized Focus Group Questions for Teachers

1. What were your main motivations for becoming a second-career educator?
2. What were the challenges faced as a new teacher with alternative certification during the first few years?
3. What are the rewards of being an alternatively certified teacher?
4. How would you describe your transition from your previous career to this career?
5. What are some ways you developed career goals as a means to manage outcome expectations as you transitioned into your new career as a teacher?

FQ1 helped answer research SQ3: How has this express route to certification impacted the new teacher's first years? This question was asked to determine the motivating factors that lead career changers into classrooms (McElhaney, 2016). FQ2 helped answer sub-question two, which stated: What expected and unexpected outcomes did second-career educators experience in teaching? This question was asked to discover what, if any, were some challenges second-career educators experienced (Osborne, 2018). Finally, FQ3 through FQ5 helped answer SQ2 and SQ3: What expected and unexpected outcomes did second-career educators experience in teaching? And how has this express route to certification impacted the new teacher's first years? These questions helped the researcher dive into how the participants truly felt about and experienced alternative certification (Kokiko, 2009; Osborne, 2018).

## **Archival Records**

In addition to items already mentioned, notes, leaflets, handouts, newspapers, memos, quotes, and any physically recordable document make up a diverse assortment known as archival records (Rapley, 2007). Archival records in the form of past documented interviews in articles, blogs, and dissertations, can be included as part of the third data collection (Roulston, 2019). Archival records add an element of historical relevance to the data (Campbell et al., 2020). According to Campbell et al., (2020), archival records strengthen triangulation and expand the analysis. When archival records are added to personal accounts and experiences, more vital data is generated. As a third data collection method for this study, I used archival records. A primary advantage of archival records is the fusion between primary and secondary resources it provides (Creswell, 2013). Archival records include but are not limited to photos, web pages, memoranda, logs, policies, program designs, and official documents (Barnes et al., 2018; Salamon, 2017; Teaching Certification.com, 2021).

Archival records were gathered through research of the above sources and requested from participants willing to share. Archival records served as a third data collection to portray the participant's inner positive reflections of their years in teaching (Moore, 2017). Another advantage of using archival records was the opportunity to view and compare similarities from the past and present and find meaning between firsthand and secondhand accounts (Bowen, 2009). In addition, I incorporated archival records to provide an opportunity to view various documents to learn of other perspectives of alternative certification (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Finally, researchers believe that archival records may unexpectedly uncover important content and patterns in the past and present research not found in interviews or the focus group (Moore,

2017; Roulston, 2019). For these reasons, this study included archival records as a third data point.

### **Data Analysis**

I conducted data analysis on the semi-structured interviews, the focus group, and the archival records following Moustakas' (1994) steps for phenomenological research in the data analysis process. An overview of the data analysis procedures included recording all statements, reviewing statements for accuracy, eliminating repeated information, and following phenomenological reductions. Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction included horizontalizing, bracketing, coding by themes, clustering the data into themes, and organizing the themes into a coherent textural and structural description. It also incorporates deeming themes as applicable, considering multiple perspectives, and categorizing the data into how and what context (Moustakas, 1994).

#### **Horizontalization**

According to Moustakas' Seven Steps (1994), I began the process in the phenomenological reduction phase, particularly the horizontalizing step. Moustakas (1994) noted that horizontalization gives each statement equal value. Horizontalizing included organizing data files (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I organized data files as my first step, horizontalized the data, assigning equal importance to each statement, and coded data by themes and general similarities (Vagle, 2018).

I took the transcribed data and physically laid it out before becoming familiar with all data that I collected during this step in horizontalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Next, I included the transcribed data in the horizontalization phase information from archival records to

help begin an informal mental recollection of the details (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Roulston, 2019; Salamon, 2017). Next, I coded each participant's statements separately to preserve their uniqueness and coded their accounts by notating each one with specific and unique identifying characteristics (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Another step was to analyze dialogue. I analyzed interview transcriptions and focus group discussion dialogue using the program Transcribe and concentrated on including data that deepened the phenomenon of alternative certification. Finally, as I began transcribing the data from the interviews and focus groups, I started to see themes and commonalities evolve (Moustakas, 1994). The thematic analysis helped me interpret the meanings embedded in the data and make sense of those meanings.

### **Epoché**

Epoché is the setting aside of researcher biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) suggested that a researcher use epoché, the method of bracketing out the participant's experiences to focus on the ones related to the study. Bracketing separated researcher experiences from participants' experiences related to the study (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I bracketed my experiences concerning alternative certification and preconceptions, including assumptions and opinions (Creswell, 2013).

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological reduction allows important themes to develop through the data. The data helps to describe the phenomenon. To eliminate researcher bias, I told the personal experiences through epoché (Vagle, 2018). I read and reread the data to gain a holistic understanding of the individual's lived experiences and listened a second time to secure accuracy and not presuppose or impose my interpretation (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Coded Themes**

Data is interpreted following the grounded theory described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1992). This grounded theory allowed me to construct ideas based on the data collected. Coding is the primary strategy used to categorize and analyze participant responses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992). McGovern (2003) discussed that coding allowed the researcher to organize research findings to identify similarities and responses. By utilizing open coding, I examined the similarities and differences identified in the categories, highlighted similar reactions with a specific color, and looked closely at participants' significant statements to compare and contrast (Creswell, 2013).

Moustakas (1994) suggested that open coding could be utilized to conduct qualitative research in the initial stages of collecting and organizing data for interpretation. I went another step further and coded clustering statements into familiar groups and themes by textural and structural description, which led to a context that answered how and what questions (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I anticipated that a discussion of common themes would emerge from the initial analysis among the focus group (Creswell, 2013; Mathena, 2017). For this reason, I also analyzed the data from the focus group.

Coding themes include organizing and sorting data simultaneously (Osborne, 2018). Therefore, I coded themes, highlighted significant statements, clustered statements into groups with commonality almost simultaneously, and followed up with grouping statements to ensure meaningful units' organization (Creswell, 2013; McGovern, 2003).

As a culminating practice, I reread all text and placed notes in corresponding margins (Creswell, 2013). The interview data were analyzed for accurate participant response and

transcription. Axial coding confirmed that the categories authentically represented participant responses and examined if some types were related. I used axial coding to identify and investigate all critical factors in the questioning phase (Chenail, 2011). As a final step, I employed selective coding after analyzing open and axial coding. This process helped reveal critical themes in the data (Creswell, 2013).

### **Textural Description**

A written description of what the alternatively certified teachers experienced is necessary to include in phenomenology. A textual description helps to create a full written report of the experience. I transcribed the actual participant's words before coding to gain a detailed textual description and then completed member checking to assess the research process and the validity of the instruments and research questions (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Structural Description**

A written description of how the alternatively certified teachers experienced the phenomenon is also necessary to include to ground this phenomenological study on alternative certification. A structural description is a follow-up to the textual description. As Moustakas noted, an analysis of how participants experienced the phenomenon is equally important and gives a clearer reference frame. I performed imaginative variation, as a structural description. This is also referred to by writing a description of the context or setting that influenced the individuals who experienced the phenomenon (Mathena, 2017; Osborne, 2018; Vagle, 2018).

### **Composite Description**

The final step in Moustakas's (1994) Seven Steps includes compiling all data into a single transmission. This method is also referred to as invariant structure (Creswell, 2013). The

composite description offers reduction, thus leaving the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). At the point of the composite description, the text began to resemble a narrative of what happened and how it happened. I provided a complete picture of what I found to be the essence of the phenomenon using the composite description (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology calls for the descriptions of the lived experience's essence to be explanatory and not interpretive. According to Moustakas, bringing all data from multiple sources together through the data analysis process makes the data more meaningful.

### **Trustworthiness**

A phenomenological study is centered on hearing the voices and entering participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, I ensured that the validation of data was accurate and trustworthy. I used triangulation to validate the methods, data collection, and theoretical framework (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Richardson-Spears, 2018) using multiple data collection methods. I transcribed interviews and enlisted a focus group and archival records to achieve triangulation in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). I brought the transcripts back to the participants to check for accuracy and misinterpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, a peer review provided an additional check of the research by examining the research methods, data collection, analysis, and meanings (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I conducted a peer review to gain insight from a trusted source. Implementing four accountability standards helped achieve additional trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The four accountability standards were credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Credibility**

Credibility touches on the scope of how accurate and reliable the description of the data is (Creswell, 2013). Credibility also depends on the quality of the data gathered and the researcher's ability to analyze it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using the steps outlined by Moustakas (1994), I presented the research data to the best of my ability and used multiple data collection methods to validate the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Credibility was attained through numerous correspondences with participants and data triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews and a focus group helped to achieve credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and conformability are like reliability in quantitative studies and deal with consistency, which is addressed through the study's quality data and setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dependability involves displaying a common thread throughout the study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Conformability refers to the authenticity of the study. I checked for conformability by eliminating any researcher bias that exists (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I achieved dependability and conformability by utilizing member checking and transcribing data into written form. Member checking included thoughtful and purposeful examining of data to ensure the transcriptions were accurate and consistent with alternative certification experience (Moustakas, 1994). This step occurred after completing transcriptions and data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Checking was done by bringing the data back to the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This checking step allowed participants to check for accuracy, which added to the experience's credibility (Creswell, 2013).

I used detailed, thick descriptions to ensure that my study's data was accurate and transferable (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Rich, thick descriptions are detailed explanations of the participants and settings (Moustakas, 1994) which allow the data to be transferred without losing the meanings or essences. Lastly, according to Creswell (2013), triangulation of the data from multiple sources was necessary to provide dependability and confirmability.

### **Transferability**

Transferability was another feature of the qualitative research that was considered to be vital. Transferability was evidence that the study's findings could be replicated in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher strove to accomplish transferability through the study to add to the greater research body (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transferability was limited or reduced based on the study site and setting (Eller, 2016). I increased transferability by including age, gender type, and ethnicities (Eller, 2016). I also achieved transferability by using rich details gathered from interviews and a focus group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure that this study could be replicated, I prepared complete research and was careful not to eliminate important details (Osborne, 2018).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are moral principles that a researcher must follow. These considerations ensure that research is conducted without intention to harm participants or deceive them in any way. They help ensure the validity of the research performed.

The first step required was to receive the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Creswell, 2013). All participants were required to sign an informed consent form which

included a description of the purpose of the study and that their participation was voluntary (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Informed consent assures participants that the data collected and how it will be used is explicitly shared with them. Another ethical consideration involved maintaining the line drawn between the researcher and participants as I observed, evaluated, and interpreted data obtained from participants (Sanjari et al., 2014). I ensured that participants' privacy was the utmost priority and assigned a pseudonym to each participant to protect identities (Creswell, 2013). All data was secured under a password and all documents involved were stored in a locked container (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Additionally, all data was retained in secure storage and will be destroyed after three years. I ensured that individuals knew that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could exit the study at will. Each participant received a copy of the data transcribed that related to that participant and they were made aware of whether they were in the study's final stages (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I reported the data with honesty and respect for the participants. This study's benefit gave a voice to alternatively certified educators to describe their individual experiences. Although there were no known risks associated with this study at this time, every effort was taken to safeguard every participant ethically (Creswell, 2013).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Etheridge, 2015; Harmon, 2016). The phenomenological approach of qualitative research used to explore the perspective of second-career professionals in education spotlighted the rich, multi-faced, first-hand experiences

of alternatively certified educators from the perspective of those who have lived it. The three methods used to collect data were interviews, focus groups, and archival records. Chapter Three outlined the steps and characteristics of this phenomenological study centered on alternatively certified educators. I described the sampling methods that were used for this study and through triangulation, we successfully narrowed the participant's stories to the ones that were most impactful to tell (Patton, 2015). The chapter concluded with a check for credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability accuracy, and a description of ethical consideration conformability.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina. In phenomenology, the researcher aims to understand participants' behaviors, perceptions, emotions, and experiences through examining their lived experiences as related to the researcher (Bowling & Ball, 2018; Creswell, 2013). For this study, the group studied was the alternatively certified educators who remained in education beyond the first three to five years. A definition of alternatively certified is those individuals with an undergraduate degree in an area outside of education who has become certified through an additional degree, additional coursework, additional training, or an exam by an education licensing body (Bowling & Ball, 2018). In this chapter, the profiles of 11 individuals who fit the alternatively certified profile are described. The results of the data were gathered and presented in narrative and tabular forms. Themes and sub-clusters in the study gave answers to research questions. The data was triangulated through three data sources. Finally, a summary concludes this chapter.

### **Participants**

The 11 participants in the study were teachers, at a point in their second careers, and who taught in urban elementary schools beyond three to five years. Seven participants were still in teacher roles. Four participants were in educational administration or leadership capacities. All participants shared descriptions of positives and challenges of their duties and responsibilities. All participants brought a range of experiences, training, and professional knowledge to their role.

I began the study with the suggested sample population of between 12 to 15 participants. I verified that all participants had entered teaching through an alternative certification route. According to Bowen (2008), since ten to 12 participants are sufficient to reach thematic saturation of a phenomenon, the researcher settled on 11 participants. Getting to the saturation point in the thematic analysis was essential to the validity of this qualitative study. All participants had experienced the phenomenon of teaching as a second profession. Participants were a mixture of five men and six women and were 26 years and older.

Participants who had taught for three to five years under an alternative license were selected through purposeful criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2001). Pseudonyms were used to protect each participant's identity. Thirteen participants responded to initial surveys; however, only 11 met the criteria and moved on to be interviewed. Of the 11 participants, seven individuals took part in the focus group. All 11 participants shared archival records.

**Table 1***Teacher Participant Information*

<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Years in First Career</b>	<b>Years in Second Career</b>	<b>Highest Degree Earned</b>
Interview	Ms. Brown	1	5	Masters
Interview	Maggy	1	5	Masters
Interview Focus Group	John	1	24	Masters
Interview Focus Group	Music Man	1	18	Bachelors
Interview	Savvy	1	5	Masters
Interview Focus Group	Pee Dee	3	6	Masters
Interview Focus Group	Marto	2.5	16	Doctorate
Interview Focus Group	Dr. Hannah	2	17	Doctorate
Interview	Ant Gray	7	14	Masters
Interview Focus Group	James D.	8	14	Masters
Interview Focus Group	Michelle C.	3	11	Masters

**Ms. Brown**

Ms. Brown, a 39-year-old woman, taught for five years. She graduated from her undergraduate studies with a bachelor's degree in child and family development and a minor in Spanish. After getting a job as a teaching assistant at a child development program, she fell in love with teaching because she saw herself “as a teacher running the classroom and not just as an assistant.” Thoughts of a future in teaching led her to find alternative ways to get certified. For the most part, Ms. Brown stayed as a teaching assistant and did her “own research” on certification. However, to ensure that she remained in the district where she was employed as a teaching assistant, she pursued certification through an online master's degree education program.

After gaining certification, she worked for four years as a lead classroom teacher in an early childhood classroom and then started to work on her national board certification. Ms. Brown felt that the alternative certification application process was convenient because it allowed her to continue working while studying, not have to quit her employment, and dedicate all her time to going back to the traditional school setting to become certified. The alternative certification process for her, although directive, still allowed for her to have options as to what level she wanted to be ultimately certified to teach. Ms. Brown felt that more should be done to “streamline the process” for those interested in being alternatively certified. Suggestions she gave included creating a comprehensive list of the online schools and the programs that met the certification requirements and standards of the state. She also felt that greater emphasis should be

placed on opportunities across the spectrum of teaching and not just on alternatively certifying teachers for middle and high school.

**Maggy**

Maggy taught for five years and was in education for more than nine years. She came to teaching from the background of having an earned psychology degree as an undergraduate. Maggy said that she "liked to study people, " which is what drew her to psychology. She enjoyed her coursework so much that she extended her education and achieved a master's degree in professional counseling. Maggy's entrance into education began when she was hired as a teaching assistant in her local district. After three years, she switched roles and became a parent educator. She held the parent educator role for six and a half years.

During Maggy's professional first years, she taught dance lessons within the high school circuit in her area. She occupied other jobs simultaneously while teaching. She also worked at elementary and middle schools levels for a short time. Maggy subsequently left those roles at the elementary and middle school levels and returned to work for one semester as a dance teacher at a high school. Maggy currently teaches at a combination elementary and middle school and has taught there for four years. She stated that teaching is easy for her because she is "passionate" about it.

Participants were asked to elaborate on their college experience. Maggy admitted that her college experience impacted her employment decisions. As an alternatively certified teacher, she noted that her college training and experience as a counseling major contributed most to her success as a teacher. Maggy highlighted the courses she took while training to be a counselor. She mentioned that other courses she took related to counseling strengthened her communication skills and taught her how to engage and motivate others.

She described the alternative certification process as a “boot camp” where she got all she needed in a short period. In her opinion, she believed that the fast-tracked was ideal for her. The aspects of the alternative certification track that were especially beneficial to Maggy were that coursework was offered during the summer recess, hands-on experience within her current job, and having mentor teachers and coaches as supports during the process.

### **John**

John, a 46-year-old man, taught since August 1997 and is now an administrator. He graduated with a dual undergraduate degree in bioengineering and physical anthropology and a minor in fine arts. He did not have any aspirations of being a teacher. He was on his way to medical school. However, during his senior year of college, he was asked to serve on a team of undergraduate researchers. He went into a local middle school and taught nutrition and health science as part of a more comprehensive community study on heart disease in the inner city. This experience piqued his interest in the possibilities in the field of education. John recalled hearing that the need for teachers at the middle school and high school level was great. The idea of helping to meet demand is what drew him. Looking back, John credits his work with middle schoolers for “triggering” his love for teaching.

John entered education as a provisionally licensed high school science teacher in the NYC Department of Education despite not having any educational credits. Provisional licensure was an alternative certification pathway that NYC offered to fill high need areas like science, math, and special education. Individuals with undergraduate degrees in high-need instructional areas such as science and math worked as full-time teachers with the provisional license. John

worked as a high school science teacher for three years. Soon after, he transferred to the elementary level as an itinerant science and social studies teacher teaching K through 6th grade.

Each year John was given a provisional license if he continued teaching in an NYC Department of Education school and took courses in a sponsored teacher education program at a locally accredited college. Having his provisional license made the reciprocity process easy when he relocated to South Carolina. In addition, John's experiences in secondary schools opened an alternative route to teacher certification. John eventually completed the requirements for full certification by completing an accelerated teacher preparation program during a summer-long intensive for second career educators.

The most significant experiences in his alternative certification journey were the opportunities to collaborate. He partnered with a master teacher. He also co-taught for several semesters. John recalled how helpful the co-teaching model was when learning and implementing new curriculum programs. The continuous support of an experienced master or co-teacher was significant in his development as a teacher.

Equally influential was that he was chosen to pilot a new literacy program while working as a provisionally licensed teacher. As part of a cohort of transformative teacher leaders, he was expected to "learn the content then teach the content." He recalled never feeling overwhelmed because he was fueled by "passion." He participated in the intensive Writers and Readers Workshop training at the Columbia University Teacher's College led by Lucy Calkins, the pioneer in whole-language literacy instruction. John believed that these experiences contributed to his successes.

On the one hand, he was able to utilize his science background. On the other hand, the discipline of a science background made it easy to learn other programs such as a new reading program. Joh felt that the more knowledge he gained, the broader his pedagogy. He also believed that the acquired new skill sets made him more marketable. Driven by his success in his second career, John sought certification in other teaching areas. He always kept memories of "good teachers' he was fortunate to have as a young student close and purposed to be just like the great teachers.

### **Music Man**

Music Man taught for 18 years. He recalled that he began his academic life pursuing art. He attended an art high school, but he switched to music, although he intended to graduate and pursue an art degree. He focused on music performance and composition since high school. In college, as an undergraduate, he pursued a music education degree. He aimed to become a music performer and, in turn, teach others how to perform as well. His long-term goals were to play an instrument and produce music of all kinds.

Music Music Man loved to teach students at their level when it came to teaching. He was especially interested in understanding multiple styles of learning. He believed that teaching music required that the teacher instructs in different ways-sometimes teaching in small groups, the teaching of individuals, and teaching of the whole group. He recalled how uncomfortable some teachers were with his teaching style. It was customary for Music Man to have several events happening in his classroom simultaneously because of his music production background. It did not bother him to have students practicing in one area while he conferenced with another group. He was confident that his students were progressing and his "organized chaos" worked.

He felt that support from his administration made the most significant difference in his alternative certification experience as a music teacher. He thought that the school administrator's insistence on recognizing the importance of music education ensured his success in implementing some of the initiatives and practices that he put in place in his classroom. He brought his experience as a music performance and production major to the classroom experience with his students. During his alternative certification journey, he did not have to serve as a substitute teacher but rather remained to teach music because the school's administrator felt that music education was an essential part of the school's learning environment. He expressed feeling as though his position as a music teacher was valued.

He appreciated the freedom to teach music in innovative ways and not be asked to serve as a substitute teacher when staff members were absent. He loved letting students create music. He loved watching the face of students when they picked up a new instrument in class. He loved when they learned how to make sounds to make real music.

His alternative certification journey began when he examined his bachelor's degree transcript to determine whether he had the requisite credit hours to properly teach in the field that was most suitable to his educational experience. Since he would teach music on the secondary level, it was just a matter of taking a test. In addition, he had to take a few education classes to accumulate the necessary credits to qualify as a certified music teacher fully.

His suggestions for enhancing the alternative certification process included offering college classes to prepare candidates for setting up their classrooms. Before teaching, experiences such as playing drums and piano for a community choir prepared him for his teaching career. However, a downside of his alternative certification journey was that it lacked a

mentoring component. To make up for this handicap, he went to class, took notes, and completed the requisite tests independently.

### **Savvy**

Savvy taught for five years. She described herself as a "people-centered person." Her bachelor's degree was in deaf studies with a track toward Human Services. She did her studies at a School for the Deaf.

Upon graduation from college, she worked in a day program for adults with developmental disabilities. In her first year working in a day program, she enrolled in a master's program to get her initial licensure in elementary education. She obtained her first teaching job that same year. She started working in the classroom while still working on her graduate degree.

Before settling into teaching at the elementary level, her long-term goals in education included teaching on the college level and working as an academic coach. However, she felt that her constant relocating due to her husband's military service would not bring that dream to fruition. One thing Savvy spoke fondly of was the experience working with deaf students. She believed that her internship among the deaf population was the most significant formative experience of her teaching journey. At this point, she learned that she had a special connection with students. After working with third grade to sixth graders, she sought an opportunity to work with adults. She worked with adults for a while but realized that working with kids "was her soft spot" and suited her better.

Savvy completed her undergraduate work on a physical campus and did all her online graduate work. However, as she pursued her alternative certification, she was pleased that it was online and allowed her to teach simultaneously. This way, teaching, and learning allowed her to

integrate some of what she learned into her classroom. Savvy explained that teaching and learning simultaneously felt like continuous and consistent professional development to her.

Her alternative certification application process was a very supportive one. She mentioned that she felt supported. She added that her school district handled most of the provisional license paperwork. This made it easy for her to focus on doing her work during the day and classwork in the evening. The only thing that she had to do was submit her transcripts to her district, who then sent them to the state department on her behalf.

### **Pee Dee**

Pee Dee taught for six years and was now an assistant principal. He considered himself a late starter in the field of education. When Pee Dee started in education, he worked closely with the school's leadership. He was fortunate that he had a chance to encounter good leadership, bad administration, great teachers, and not-so-great teachers. He was particularly concerned with how teachers reacted to children in their care. As a leader, he felt that teachers needed the tools and strategies to deal with students. His move from the classroom to leadership was not a move to get out of the classroom but rather was because of his continuous broader concern about the whole school.

The position that he would describe as the most significant in preparing him for his eventual role as a fully certified individual in education was his experience as a parent coordinator. The parent educator was part of the school leadership team working closely with the principal. He was obliged to see things from a "bird's eye view in the parent educator role." He was inspired by what he saw, so he pursued a teaching and educational leadership career. Because he began his teaching career in a failing school, he anticipated constant classroom visits

and observations by leadership and district officials. Each setting was different for him and had its own set of challenges. In some environments, he underwent firsthand experience in not being supported and then moved on to places where the support was overkill.

His road to certification evolved when he completed his collegiate studies in the evening. Pee Dee, therefore, did not have a holistic collegiate experience that included dorm room life and the social life of a campus. He began his journey to education, working as a teacher's assistant (or paraprofessional) so that he could pay for college. He took advantage of the incentives for paraprofessionals. He received a stipend to take two courses each school year. He took two classes until he had accumulated enough credits to apply to begin the alternative certification process while still working as a teaching assistant.

### **Marto**

Marto stayed in education for 16 years and eventually became an administrator and professor. She described herself as a "very determined individual." Marto mentioned that she was very driven while in high school but unsure of what area of higher education she would pursue. However, she loved mathematics and science. After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree in mathematics, she went on to earn a Master of Arts degree in Spanish literature. Additionally, she completed a Master of Arts in Teaching Spanish and then an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership.

Marto explained that she was led to teaching by an innate desire to make a difference. However, she was unsure that simply making a difference would be a lucrative decision. On the one hand, she wanted to be in a corner office in corporate America, make money, and be in management. But on the other hand, she felt the pull to help students, fill gaps, and differentiate

strategies to fit student needs. Additionally, she had a strong desire to support teachers and cultivate relationships with students, parents, and other stakeholders.

Marto studied abroad for a short while. She believed that her experiences studying abroad were her most significant formative experience. A love for social relationships enticed her and catapulted her desire to learn about other cultures. In return, she wanted her students to experience a broad scope of learning while in her classroom. She was taught as a young adult that "integrity and transparency would be needed at every level of success." So with these guiding principles in mind and with caution and excitement, she brought her philosophy and worldview into her classroom.

Marto's time in the classroom came to a halt after only eight months. She was saddened by the idea that she would not be able to do something she was growing to love because of the absence of a teaching certificate. However, on the upside, she learned that she could obtain employment in the military as a Spanish Linguist. So she joined the army and worked in the linguist role for two and a half years. While in the military, she grounded herself and focused on completing a Master of Arts in Teaching program as her next move.

She worked as a long-term substitute and took courses at the same time. In her opinion, "learning while teaching" added to her "toolbox" and increased her experience. She did not have to go through the internship or teacher preparation program like an ordinary individual, and the length of the process was shortened because she already had teaching experience. She took the certification assessments, passed them, and moved to a public school. She was hired by the principal, who knew her and needed a Spanish teacher. Her suggestion for enhancing the alternative certification process was to make it fit the needs of the individual.

**Dr. Hannah**

Dr. Hannah stayed in the education field for 17 years and is currently a high school principal and college professor. He got interested in teaching while traveling the subway to his previous job in finance. Dr. Hannah saw a sign advertising a need for teachers. He felt that he could be a teacher and further investigated the opportunity. He found out that he could apply with at least a bachelor's degree to change his current career. Since the changeover, he has earned three master's degrees, a certificate in advanced graduate studies, and a Ph.D. Dr. Hannah added co-teaching licenses in special education, social studies, and early childhood education to his credentials. In addition, he served in the classroom, as a school administrator, and on the district-level leadership team. When Dr. Hannah asked why he earned so many degrees in a field that was his second choice, he responded by saying he "found his calling" and wanted to perfect his craft.

His long-term goals included doing more educational policy work with private foundations. In addition, his goal was to open a boarding school for young males and females in high school. The formative experience that was most significant to him was the fast-tracked nature of the alternative certification process that he went through. He only served three years in the classroom before entering the principalship, which initially lasted another three years. He taught teachers at the collegiate level for five years, and then he returned to being a principal and has been doing that for four years now.

**Ant Gray**

Ant Gray was in her 14th year at the time of the interview. She shared many sentimental stories tied to students she taught in previous years and still connected with in various arenas.

She described herself as someone who "stayed in the background and supported others." She noted that other teachers with less experience learned under her and continued to pursue leadership roles. Ant Gray added that she embraced them when leadership opportunities presented themselves but never sorted them out.

Ant Gray graduated with a bachelor's degree in computer science but could not find work in her field. She got a job in the insurance field paying medical claims. Then, she moved to a company that created software for insurance companies. She worked as a business analyst and then a tester of programs designed to pay claims. She held these positions for almost five years. She made herself relevant in each of her corporate roles. A reduction in the workforce, unfortunately, changed her lifestyle. She looked for other jobs.

While at her daughter's school, one of the teachers asked her to consider becoming a substitute teacher. She got onto the school's substitute list and subbed a couple of times at a few schools. The principal asked her to look at the job board on one of her assignments. She explored the job board and applied for a job as a small group instructor, and she was hired. As the small group instructor, she was responsible for serving students in groups who needed extra intervention in reading.

The position, though convenient, did not work out as she hoped. She recalled days with no students coming to her. Nevertheless, she found other ways to show forth her talent. She made herself worthwhile by assisting other teachers in the building. After some time, a door opened for her as a computer lab teacher. She held that position for two years.

It was after this that she inquired about becoming certified. So, she officially started a Master of Arts in Education program at the University of South Carolina. Shortly after starting

the program, she learned more opportunities to be certified. One program she learned of was the option of working through the PACE program. Ant Gray explained that the PACE program was an alternative certification program in the state. She also explained that the PACE program would allow her to work while attending school.

Before obtaining her master's degree, Ant Gray had developed a solid mastery of technology uses and applications. When asked about her long-term goals, Ant Gray stated that she hoped to combine teaching and her knowledge in technology at an instructional coach level. She believed that a series of unfortunate events led her to purpose. She added that she "was blessed" to be in the profession. She concluded that losing her corporate job, in essence, led to "other doors of opportunity." The shift to education ultimately brought her physically closer to her children. She was also able to marry her computer expertise with teaching.

**James D.**

James D. came to teaching from a military background. He recalled how his oldest child was seven years old when he left the service. He added that he enjoyed the military, "ranked up several times, and was proud of his accomplishments. He began teaching in 2007 when he left the military. His first position was as a substitute teacher in the school district where his children attended school.

While working as a substitute teacher, he heard that the local school district offered a unique certification route. However, the certification path James D. learned about came with the condition that individuals would have to choose an area of high need to teach to enroll through the program. So James D. sought certification in special education. Shortly after achieving

certification, he obtained a permanent position as a self-contained classroom teacher. His long-term goal was to remain in teaching until retirement.

At the time of the interview, James was still teaching at the same school where he started. He devoted his time to perfecting his craft and promoting student achievement. As a result, he earned the honor of being named certified employee of the year at his school. He was also named district teacher of the year. One thing James D. was not fond of. He felt that the new teachers he worked with did not have the support he had. As a result of seeing new teachers struggle to gain footing in teaching, he looked for ways to support them. In his 5th year of teaching, he became a mentor teacher and has mentored ever since. He added that “serving others” was what he had been taught and a principle he lived by.

His most significant experience during his alternative teaching journey was teaching alongside other military veterans who came to teaching as a career change. These experiences were substantial because these military veterans supported him emotionally, and like him, their military training provided them with a strong sense of self-efficacy and discipline.

### **Michelle C.**

Michelle C. taught for 11 years. While in college, she was a fine art major. After graduating, she held positions like photographer, magazine editor, and freelance illustrator. Before transitioning to teaching, the last job she had was that of a small art studio manager. An instructional coach at an elementary school in the community reached out to her and asked her to start a partnership between the school and the studio. Michelle C. recalled that the conversation “sparked high interest” for her. She seized the opportunity to “extend students’ art interest beyond the walls of the school.” The suggestion soon turned into a reality. The partnership she

started gave classes opportunities to come on field trips to the studio. As a result of the program's success, she planned for more frequent scheduled class visits.

Michelle C. developed teaching cycles that encouraged classes to come more often. At times she did not know between her and the students, who was "more excited." The partnership continued for two years. Unfortunately, the art studio eventually had to close. The principal subsequently reached out to Michelle C. and asked if she would be interested in coming on board as a long-term substitute. After subbing in the school for almost a year, the school district shared an opportunity to become a certified art teacher. She seized the opportunity and earned a master's degree in teaching.

## **Results**

The results of this study gave second career educators the chance to share their authentic experiences post entering teaching through an alternative route. This study's findings are arranged following processes, ideas, and structure endorsed by Moustakas (1994). The findings of this study are organized thematically and according to research questions. The data analysis process included, but was not limited to, horizontalizing, bracketing, coding by themes, clustering the data into themes, and organizing the themes into a coherent textural and structural description. Through the use of research questions, a discussion among a focus group, and a search of participants' archival records, a total of ten themes as well as five sub-clusters surfaced from the data. Additional efforts incorporated sorting through themes, deeming specific themes as applicable, considering various perspectives, and categorizing the data into how and what context.

### **Theme Development**

Themes developed as individual interviews, focus group discussions, and archival records were analyzed through horizontalization. Similar themes began to emerge and were coded, as each interview took place. Themes began to solidify as the conclusion of the focus group discussion. Certain words, phrases, and technical references that were deemed significant began to stand out and at the same time become commonly shared among participants. In total, ten themes and five sub-clusters emerged from the data. As part of horizontalization, the researcher reviewed the audio and electronic transcripts, as well as cross-referenced the data with handwritten notes taken during interviews. Themes and sub-clusters were developed, coded, and organized (see Table 2).

Table 2

<i>Themes and Sub-Clusters</i>		
<b>Open-Codes</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Clusters</b>
Goals, “felt-at-home”, “felt supported”, a mindset shift.	Participant’s Experiences	
Playful, personable, confident, love children, hands-on-learner, hard-worker.	Participant’s Personalities	
Personal loss, relocation.	Significant Experiences	
Liked or disliked college, changed majors, scholarships.	College Experiences	
Natural mentor, flexibility, communication, mentorship.	Building Relationships with Administration and Staff	
Flexibility, communication, table talks.	Building Relationships with Students and Parents	
The certification process, reciprocity.	Challenges	
Professional, self-directed, confident, previous career, purpose-driven.	Self-efficacy	
On-the-job training, professional development, cohort, support, purpose, proactive, intensive training, fast-tracked.	Outcome Expectations	Positive Negative
Job satisfaction, health benefits, salary, expertise, a new beginning.	Benefits of Alternative Certification	Personal Professional

**Theme One: Participants' Experiences**

Some of the second career educators who participated in this study had years of experience in education as their second career that exceeded their years of experience in their first careers. According to Troesch and Bauer (2017), teachers' experiences fueled teachers' self-efficacy, and in turn, the teacher's self-efficacy promoted positive experiences. For example, James D. shared that his experiences with brand new teachers who were employed after him and hearing their cries for support prompted him to do more in the way of mentoring.

Pee Dee added that the negative interactions he witnessed between teachers and students caused him to be a more caring and supportive teacher than what he had experienced. According to McElroy (2019), prior job experience, regardless of the correlation with the present job duties, remains a critical factor in projecting success and job satisfaction. Table 3 highlights theme one -- participants' years of experience in education and before.

Table 3

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*Participant's Experiences*

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<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Years in First Career</b>	<b>Years in Second Career</b>
Ms. Brown	1	5
Maggy	1	5
John	1	24
Music Man	1	18
Savvy	1	5
Pee Dee	3	6
Marto	2.5	16
Dr. Hannah	2	17
Ant Gray	7	14
James D.	8	14
Michelle C.	3	11

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## **Theme Two: Participants' Personalities**

The second theme that threaded its way through the study was participants' personalities. In the interview, the participants were asked to describe their personalities. Then, participants were placed in one or more of four categories from the descriptions provided. The four categories were outgoing, a team-player, leader, and introvert. Again, it was interesting to see how participants fell into multiple categories.

The participants' personalities data, after analysis, showed a trend of similarities. For example, nine of the eleven participants considered themselves outgoing, a team-player, and a leader. All but one participant considered himself outgoing. Every participant felt they were a team player. One person classified himself as an introvert. Surprisingly, the one who labeled himself as an introvert was the one who advanced to the Ph.D. level with no formal teacher training and whose future goal was to open a boarding school for troubled youth.

In a previous study on social cognitive theory, Green (2015) proposed that individuals' personalities were shaped partly by their experiences and past and present social interactions. An example of personality being shaped by experiences and social interactions can be seen when an individual who ambitious people surround becomes ambitious also. Another example of personality being shaped by experiences and interactions is when an individual working in a setting where everyone around him embraces professional development also grows to love and value professional development. An example of how one participant's personality played a role in her success in the second career and social cognitive theory at work is highlighted below:

Ms. Brown stated:

I have an outgoing personality. I am not shy. I love what I do so much. I love children because they bring out something inside me that pushes me to keep coming up with new ideas. I am motivated by them. Additionally, I love teaching and learning even more.

Therefore, I seek out and engage in professional development opportunities willingly.

Music Man described his personality as "big." He shared that he was a jokester, jovial with students, comfortable with all people, playful, and a confidence builder. He went on to add how students and colleagues alike deemed him the most popular teacher on the staff. He noted that he "wore the accolade proudly" and strived to say and do the right thing knowing that he was being watched. Savvy proposed that because she was a hardworker and came in early and stayed late, she was often openly recognized and nominated for leadership-level tasks. Ant Gray considered herself a stern but fair teacher who acted a little silly at times. However, she believed that some of the more challenging students were placed in her class due to her personality. She added that she never had to "rule with an iron fist," but her ability to build every student up drew students to her.

A common personality trait among participants was their ability to be confident, charismatic, and loving. Additionally, all participants focused less on their own challenges and more on difference-making. Broadly speaking, it is clear that the participants' personalities enabled them to be successful in teaching as a second and find longevity. When searching for good teachers, interviewers will seek out leaders, team-players, self-starters, not shy, and who will take command of a situation. See Table 4.

Table 4

<i>Participant's Personalities</i>				
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Outgoing</b>	<b>Team-Player</b>	<b>Leader</b>	<b>Introvert</b>
Ms. Brown	X	X	X	
Maggy	X	X	X	
John	X	X	X	
Music Man	X	X	X	
Savvy	X	X	X	
Pee Dee	X	X	X	
Marto	X	X	X	
Dr. Hannah		X	X	X
Ant Gray	X	X		
James D.	X	X	X	
Michelle C.	X	X	X	

### **Theme Three: Significant Experiences**

The third theme that emerged from the study was significant experiences. Some participants identified what was missing from their first career was a sense of purpose. For example, Maggy started as a psychology major. The psychology degree opened the door to a position as a teaching assistant and parent educator later on. Maggy relayed that her interactions with students were limited and not as purposeful as they could have been. Maggy noted that each interaction with students pulled something from her. She stated that the exchanges were so

significant that she felt that it would be purposeful to go back to school and get a master's degree in counseling to teach students in the capacity of a supportive teacher.

Savvy was trained in human services with a minor concentration in deaf studies. She recalled her most significant experience came while she was completing an internship in a day program. Savvy noted that she made unique connections. She added that the connections felt purposeful, "felt right and the most Zen." Savvy thought that the "uncensored-ness and honesty" was illuminating and made pursuing a master's degree in elementary education the most logical next move.

Like Savvy, Ant Gray shared a similar sentiment centered on purpose. Ant Gray had a computer studies and finance background. She mentioned that in a male-dominated field, she ascended the success ladder slowly but steadily. She revealed that, sadly, when down-sizing occurred, she was one of some professionals to be let go. She added that before being let go, she felt her potential dwindling. On a positive note, losing her job gave her more time to focus on her small children. She was able to be closer to home and accessible to her children. Not very long after becoming a frequent visitor, she was encouraged to become a certified substitute teacher. While working as a substitute teacher Ant Gray challenged herself to do something different. She revealed that when she opened her mind and engaged in the activities at the neighborhood school, she began to feel creative and fulfilled.

#### **Theme Four: College Experiences**

Theme four another theme that wound its way through the study was college experiences. College experiences varied from participant to participant. One-on-one interviews discovered deep, varying descriptions of college life for several participants. However, the focus group showed how closely aligned the participants' experiences were. Of the 11 participants, nine went to college on campus. One participant strictly commuted to school for undergraduate and post-graduate studies. One participant commuted for undergraduate and lived on campus for post-graduate studies. One participant lived on campus for undergraduate and attended online for post-graduate studies. One participant lived on campus, then matriculated through the military, and returned to college post-military. Finally, one participant took courses while serving in the military. Ms. Brown's undergraduate studies extended past five years, but she recalled enjoying every minute of it and learning a lot about herself. Maggy reported that college life was "crazy." Similar to Ms. Brown, Ant Gray, Michelle C., John and Savvy recalled college life on campus as enjoyable, positive, and a life-altering experience.

On the contrary, Music Man recalled not loving college life. As a result, he dropped out, and when he returned, he switched his major. Marto's college life began before she joined the military and picked up again after she returned. She described both learning experiences as being essential and contributing to her rounded-ness. The focus group compared the college life experiences of four participants. Pee Dee and Dr. Hannah shared that they had families to support, and therefore attending college on campus was not reasonable. Similarly, Marto and James D. shared that the military's financial assistance presented the most feasible option for higher education for both of them. All participants in the focus group agreed that the route they

took to receive a formal higher education was based on passion, personal interest, and what worked best for them, their families, and finances.

See Table 5.

Table 5

<i>College Experiences</i>				
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Lived On Campus</b>	<b>Commuted</b>	<b>Online</b>	<b>Military</b>
Ms. Brown	X		X	
Maggy	X			
John	X			
Music Man	X			
Savvy	X		X	
Pee Dee		X		
Marto	X			X
Dr. Hannah	X	X		
Ant Gray	X		X	
James D.			X	X
Michelle C.	X			

### **Theme Five: Building Relationships with Administration and Staff**

Theme five, building relationships with administration and staff differed from participant to participant. Interviewees acknowledged that they engaged in formal and informal interactions

and conversations to find common ground in the workplace. However, the consensus was that the school administrator or leadership team planned the formal interactions. The informal interactions occurred daily around the copy machine or while on duty. Participants also mentioned that they built relationships with administration and staff while eating lunch and outside of school at athletic events.

The focus group discussion revealed some meaningful similarities among experiences and a few differences. Ms. Brown and Savvy shared accounts of similar forms of support such as encouragement, freedom to run the classroom, and leeway in decision making while they worked as teaching assistants. Both Ms. Brown and Savvy shared that they were encouraged to become certified educators by their cooperating teachers. Maggy recalled how the administration assigned a mentor and coach to her for as long as she felt she needed them. Savvy chimed in and shared that the Technology Learning Coach was also her mentor and coach. Both Maggy and Savvy noted that their support from the mentors and coaches never felt forced but rather authentic and genuine. A common theme among the focus group was that the relationships between the second-career educator, administration, and staff extended past professional support. The focus group noted that they felt that staff and administration cared about them as people.

### Theme Six: Building Relationships with Students and Parents

A noteworthy theme that was gathered through archival records was theme six, sentimental data from students and parents. See Table 6.

Table 6

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*Sentimental Archival Records from Students and Parents.*

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<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Pictures</b>	<b>Cards</b>	<b>Invitations</b>	<b>Emails</b>	<b>Gifts</b>	<b>Acknowledgments</b>
Ms. Brown	X			X		
Maggy	X	X		X	X	X
John	X	X	X	X	X	X
Music Man	X	X	X	X	X	X
Savvy	X	X	X	X	X	X
Pee Dee	X	X	X	X	X	X
Marto	X	X	X	X	X	X
Dr. Hannah	X	X	X	X	X	X
Ant Gray	X	X	X	X	X	X
James D.	X	X		X	X	
Michelle C.	X	X	X	X	X	X

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Individual participants echoed building relationships with students and parents as being important, and similarities were drawn among the focus group. For example, Music Man discovered that students and parents grew to love him once they knew they were loved and cared about. He spoke candidly about supporting his students' families when their children succumbed

to an untimely death. Likewise, he obligated himself to support his students when they suffered the loss of a parent. He added that he learned early on, through an unfortunate incident, not to be combative but rather to accept and be open to students' and parents' concerns.

Music Man shared an emotional recollection of being asked to speak at a student's funeral. He stated that he felt it was a bittersweet honor. Savvy shared a funny story of how her students would email her on the weekends and during school breaks to find how she and her family were doing. Dr. Hannah added that his relationships with students and parents had lasted over 18 years.

When the question about relationships with students and parents was posed among the focus group, each person's demeanor changed. Each participant became reminiscent as if traveling back in time. No recollections were negative ones. Some participants shared that their students' level of trust grew and that as trust grew, academics grew also.

### **Theme Seven: Challenges**

Theme seven was the challenges each participant faced. Most participants noted experiencing the same challenges as traditional-route teachers. Some shared experiences that were unique to an alternatively certified route, some shared experiences connected to personal style, and others shared that their challenges were unique to their school setting. Individuals such as Ms. Brown, Maggy, Music Man, Ant Gray, and Pee Dee, who already had experience in a school setting by way of teaching assistant or parent educator, alluded to the fact that their challenges were connected to the paperwork and the alternative certification's process itself. They mentioned that they had to do a lot of the research themselves, gather names and contact

information, and continually follow up with licensing agents. Having the classroom management skills or even knowing the pedagogy was never a challenge for them.

On the contrary, the transition to other alternatively certified teachers was uneventful. Individuals like Savvy, Marto, and James D. reported feeling supported. Some of these individuals were alternatively certified in another state. Some spoke favorably of the reciprocity process and thought it was smooth and manageable. Some individuals felt that their prior military service was a fledging force behind a smooth changeover to teaching.

A challenge that an individual shared appeared significant and worth mentioning. One individual felt significantly supported while employed in the first school but not in the school after that. The individual noted that each attempt to climb the leadership ladder was discouraged at the second school. Yet, the individual remained on task. When a new opportunity opened up at another location, the individual pursued it and no longer focused on the challenging times.

### **Theme Eight: Self-efficacy**

Theme eight was self-efficacy. The theme of self-efficacy emerged from the interviews and focus group. This theme aligned with Stanton's (2017) research that reported that alternatively certified teachers matured while they utilized various coping strategies developed in their previous careers. Most participants characterized themselves as negotiators, innovators, and problem-solvers within their teams. Several participants were applauded for their drive to convince the team to focus on compromise and common goals. Similarly, some participants admitted that many of their colleagues struggled with aligning themselves with changes as they came down the pipeline, and some would have considered unpopular school-wide decisions.

### **Theme Nine: Outcome Expectations**

Theme nine was outcome expectations. Teacher shortages continue to be a trend in education. Various solutions have been created to address the teacher shortage. One such solution was to vet individuals with a degree in an area other than education and certify them through alternative means. Alternative certification can include obtaining a master's degree in teaching, taking specific exams, or enrolling in particular coursework. All the participants in the study experienced anticipated and/or unexpected outcomes.

**Positive outcome expectations.** The first sub-cluster in the sense of outcome expectations was discussing what was considered positive experiences. Participants conveyed how they surprisingly felt supported and valued. Participants noted feeling confident that their previous job skills served them well in lesson delivery and classroom management. Most reported that the route to an alternative certification was smooth. Many participants admitted to feeling drawn in by how uncensored students were and how candid their perspectives were in the classroom.

Participants who had the option of working while taking classes that led to certification appreciated the flexibility to study, work, and support their families at the same time. All participants reported having a mentor and some had multiple mentors. Some unique positive outcomes (but not shared by many participants) included not being formally evaluated during the first year, matriculating through the alternative certification process in one year, and being invited to be part of the school's leadership team in the first year.

**Negative outcome expectations.** The second sub-cluster in the sense of outcome expectations was discussing what was considered negative experiences. Some participants reported that while the paperwork portion of obtaining alternative certification was relatively

smooth, the coursework was intensive, and the certification exams were difficult. A few participants complained that they had to do their alternative certification research. They noted that they did not get all their information from one source but had to consult school districts, state education departments, and even college certification boards for directions on the process. A few participants shared they had difficulty setting rules, expectations, and consequences for students because it made them feel like they were being mean. A few participants also shared a requirement of alternative certification was that they had to agree to work in high needs schools, knowing full well that a high needs school meant challenges.

### **Theme Ten: Benefits of Alternative Certification**

Theme seven was the benefits of alternative certification. According to Shuls and Trivitt (2015), an alternative certification created diversity in teaching staff and increased the candidate pool. McConnell (2017) noted that alternatively certified educators were knowledgeable of technical subjects, enabling them to differentiate instruction easily. In addition, principals and school districts embraced the cultural assortment of second careers educators as a way to diversify their staff (Hohnstein, 2017).

**Personal benefits.** The first sub-cluster in the sense of benefits was the discussion of what was considered a personal benefit. Most participants shared how they became better people. This study's alternatively certified second career educators gained certification through different means. Some participants took courses while teaching to achieve certification. Some enrolled in a master's degree program that led to certification. Others opted to take an exam to qualify them to teach. All participants admitted that having choices of routes to certification was a bonus. A few participants enjoyed such perks as receiving loan forgiveness or a stipend while teaching and

learning. Most participants were welcomed on the school leadership team and shared their expertise. A few participants basked in the freedom to infuse culturally relevant pedagogy in their lessons. Finally, all participants remembered building bonds with students and their parents.

**Professional benefits.** The second sub-cluster in the sense of benefits discussed the professional benefits of teaching as a second career. From in-depth discussions with participants, it was clear that the participants did not shy away from life-long learning. The participants concluded that they willingly engaged in professional development because they believed it would increase student achievement. A few participants noted how they were encouraged to share their diverse training and skills with the staff. Participants admitted to not feeling threatened but empowered by the seasoned professionals they worked alongside. Participants welcomed on-the-job training and embraced the freedom to be creative.

**Social-emotional benefits.** Teaching as a second career brought about social-emotional benefits for many participants in the study. The third and concluding sub-cluster, social-emotional benefits, emerged from the focus group discussion and interviews. Each participant touched on feelings of fulfillment after entering teaching. Participants all shared finding a sense of purpose. Some participants acknowledged that they finally found something they loved and could cultivate long-term. Some participants bragged about developing extended family. A few participants praised themselves for their versatility, while others commended their colleagues for their unwavering encouragement. All participants mentioned that working with children brought joy and, in some cases, empowered them to reinvent themselves.

## Research Question Responses

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina. This study was designed to answer a central question and three research sub questions. The interviews, focus group, and archival records analysis attempted to answer these three research questions. The following research questions helped guide the study.

### Central Question

The central question that guided this research study was: How do alternatively certified educators describe their teaching profession experiences and perceptions in the first five years? Theme two, the participants' personalities, was vital to zero in on the participants' long-term goals. Researching participants' personalities led to an understanding of the individuals' styles and influences. For example, Ms. Brown, Maggy, John, Music Man, Pee Dee, Marto, and James D. described themselves as outgoing and team players. They each went on to add that due to their outgoing personalities, their assimilation to a new work dynamic, and learning education pedagogy was easy.

The participants' personalities data, after analysis, showed a trend of similarities. All but one participant considered themselves outgoing. Every participant felt they were a team player. One person classified himself as an introvert. Surprisingly, the one who labeled himself as an introvert was the one who advanced to the Ph.D. level with no formal teacher training and whose goal was to open a boarding school for troubled youth.

Participants all agreed that their personalities were already concrete and that they were to a certain degree set in their ways. Maggy made a point to mention that she keeps teaching

"interesting and real." She described her personality as "crazy." John added that his students said he was "jovial, passionate, and excited about teaching." Music Man described himself as "a jokester, personable, and playful." His students remembered him as "popular" and said that interactions with Music Man "built their confidence." Savvy mentioned being genuinely interested in people and students. Their students described Pee Dee Marto and James D. as "loving, caring, charismatic, giving, and no-nonsense." All participants felt that their backgrounds rendered them ready to take on a new challenge.

### **Sub-Question One**

The first research question for this study was: *How has self-efficacy given the second-career educator an advantage?* Research question one led to the development of theme eight, self-efficacy, and sought to determine the role and level of relevancy self-efficacy played in longevity in teaching. Each participant mentioned bringing confidence to education gained or developed through experience and training in their first career. Pee Dee and Dr. Hannah noted that their self-efficacy was naturally acquired. Both gave examples of a lack of male family role models, but on the other hand, a committed desire to "prove the naysayers wrong." One participant achieved the high acknowledgment of a doctorate, and the other is currently pursuing it. Self-confidence aligned with Bertrand (2019), who noted that self-efficacy was equally crucial as pedagogy. Some participants, such as Ms. Brown, Maggy, Music Man, and Savvy, brought previous experience working in a corporate setting as part of a cohort. Stanton (2017) substantiated how second-career educators utilized coping strategies from their first careers in day-to-day instruction. Marto and James D. noted that what began as a practice, drilled into them from a military background, naturally became part of their belief about themselves. Marto and

James D. added that through interactions with their students, the impression that the students can also be successfully transferred to them as well.

### **Sub-Question Two**

The second research question was: *What outcome expectations did second-career educators experience?* Research question two supported theme nine and was intended to discover what anticipated positive and negative consequences were experienced in the first three to five years. The outcome expectations had two sub-clusters. The positive outcomes sub-cluster yielded the surface responses or the responses that participants shared with little to no prompting. For example, when participants were asked to share their long-term goals, all responses included continuous learning. All participants accepted the initial alternative certification protocols willingly. No participant referenced engaging in professional development as a "waste of time." Some participants, such as Ms. Brown and Maggy, thrived with "ongoing endeavors" and plan to return to college for a second and third master's degree. All participants mentioned wanting to be a "better teacher than what they had" and saw continuous learning as the route to achieve this ambition. Dr. Hannah had several degrees beyond his first master's degree and even a doctorate. Pee Dee and Marto are pursuing doctorate degrees presently.

Another positive outcome mentioned by participants is a feeling of purpose accomplished. Music Man shared "not knowing what to pursue as a major in college." Music Man, along with all other participants, concurred that they felt a sense of belonging when placed in the school arena, either as an intern or as part of the support staff. Ms. Brown mentioned, "I learned a lot about myself" and also "how much I have to give." Ms. Brown added, "adapting and sharpening my skills was a pleasurable undertaking."

Music Man and Savvy and Ant Gray were encouraged by their school leaders to become as "hands-on" as possible with managing student behaviors. Rather than viewing the suggestion as condescending, they embraced it as a way to build their management capacity and remain as the authority figure in their classrooms. Individuals who had experience working for a school or working with students before certification through the alternative route, such as Ms. Brown, Maggy, Pee Dee, Ant Gray, James D., and Michelle C., spoke favorably of the freedom to share their expertise given to them by their school leaders. They collectively noted never feeling "singled out" for their limited pedagogical knowledge.

Negative or adverse outcomes were the other sub-cluster derived from participants' responses. Unlike the positive outcomes that were discovered easily, determining an individual's negative outcomes took prompting. When the question regarding sharing negative experiences was presented, participants took a moment to gather their recollections. Some asked for clarity about whether the negative experience had to be connected to students, administration, or the alternative certification process. The individuals were instructed to share any or all of the examples mentioned previously.

No participants shared negative experiences that involved students. Two individuals shared having negative experiences with administration. The two individuals who had negative experiences with the administration spoke of what they believed to be the source. They recalled the administrators being new and that their leadership styles did not mesh with faculty well. In other words, these individuals did not personalize the negative behaviors they experienced with administrators.

While no individuals reported regret in changing over to teaching, some said the alternative certification process was a challenge. Ms. Brown noted that while the alternative certification process was relatively smooth, she had to do her initial research. Maggy and John recalled that gaining certification was accelerated with intensive coursework that was like “boot camp” and took them away from family during the summer months and school breaks. The negative outcome shared by Music Man and Savvy was an internal shift of the mindset and not due to any external influences.

### **Sub-Question Three**

The third research question was: *How do participants describe the benefits of participating in an alternative certification path to a new career as teachers?* Research question three supported theme ten. Research question three described the personal, professional, and social-emotional benefits gained along the alternative certification route. All individuals reported benefiting from changing over to a new career. Most mentioned receiving personal, professional, and social-emotional benefits from teaching. Some recalled experiencing professional gains. All remembered feeling an increase in social-emotional value after becoming certified educators.

Some individuals, such as Ms. Brown, Maggy, John, Savvy, Pee Dee, Marto, and Ant Gray elaborated on the financial benefits of being certified to teach. They recalled how attaining more financial stability increased their household income monetarily. They mentioned feeling "relief" as the financial burdens of providing were lifted off of them. Those individuals with young children were happy to now be closer and more accessible to their children. Additionally, several participants were glad for the added safeguard of health insurance that teaching offered.

Alternative certification meant a continuation of studies. For some, the requirements included additional training through professional development. For others, it included obtaining a master's degree or taking and passing specific exams. Several participants referred to the rigor of alternative certification as what prepared and legitimized them as "highly qualified." In terms of professional benefits, no participant spoke negatively regarding the comprehensive requirements. As a matter of fact, several participants noted that they thrived because of the ongoing professional learning they received.

Participants felt good about the push for more schooling that alternative certification prompted. All of the participants enthusiastically engaged in the second round of higher education and found it purposeful. In addition, some participants capitalized on the gains additional degrees and training brought even after the requirements for certification were met. For example, Dr. Hannah now has several master's degrees and a Ph. D., and Ms. Brown, Pee Dee, and Marto aspire to pursue doctorate degrees.

Lastly, the social-emotional benefits of teachers coincidentally connected back to alternative certification. Maggy, whose undergraduate degree was in psychology, reported being more prepared to manage student behaviors than a traditionally trained teacher. Due to the current health climate, teachers have to undergo training to expand their skill set. Maggy noted being able to cater to her social-emotional self-help because of her background in psychology. Maggy also stated that her interactions with staff and students were more purposeful because of the specialized training.

Like Maggy, Savvy was trained in human services with a minor concentration in deaf studies. Human services majors, through their coursework, learned unique people skills and

effective communication skills and greater cultural awareness. These skills prepared them to enter professions where they can affect change and improve the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of others. Savvy self-reported that she made unique connections with her students. These special connections were part of the employment of social-emotional intelligence approaches to cultivate both a sense of personal value in her students and a sense of community in her classroom as a whole.

Like Savvy, Ant Gray shared a similar sentiment centered on purpose. Ant Gray had a computer studies and finance background. She mentioned that in a male-dominated field, she ascended the success ladder slowly but steadily. She revealed that sadly when down-sizing occurred, she was one of some professionals to be let go. She added that before being let go, she felt her potential dwindling. However, her entire experience of the slow rise as a female in a male-dominated arena boded well for her as a role model of consistency for her female students. Also, she has experiential knowledge of persevering and a clear social-emotional efficacy that will benefit her advancement in the field of education. Her choice to view her job loss as a positive because it allowed for her to focus on her small children further demonstrated strong social-emotional intelligence in a problematic situation.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented a description of 11 participants, the results of data analysis, and the identified themes. The data analyzed from surveys, individual interviews, the focus group, and archival records revealed ten themes. The ten themes were: participants' experiences, participants' personalities, significant experiences, college experiences, building relationships with administration and staff, building relationships with students and parents, challenges,

self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and benefits of alternative certification. The five sub-clusters were: positive outcomes, negative outcomes, personal benefits, professional benefits, and social-emotional benefits. The findings answered the following questions: (a) How do alternatively certified educators describe their experiences and perceptions of the teaching profession in the first five years? (b) How has self-efficacy given the second-career educator an advantage? (c) What outcome expectations did second-career educators experience? and (d) How do participants describe the benefits of participating in an alternative certification path to a new career as teachers? The research questions allowed second-career educators to share their stories and accounts of alternative certification. Overall, the participants agreed that the changeover held challenges but produced more positive outcomes than negative ones.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina. This chapter begins with a summary and discussion of the findings and the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications in light of the relevant literature and theory. It continues with an outline of the study's delimitations and limitations. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

A phenomenological method was taken to explore alternatively certified second-career educators' perceptions and lived experiences in urban elementary schools in South Carolina. Data were collected with a survey, interviews, a focus group, and archival records. Data from the survey were analyzed to validate each participant's match to the study. The interviews, focus group data, and archival records were transcribed but coded separately. Significant clusters were identified from responses to the interviews, focus group data, and archival records. Significant statements were also identified and coded from the three data points.

In total, ten themes and five sub-clusters emerged from the data and were identified from responses to questions guided by the three research questions and a central question. The research questions were: How has self-efficacy given the second-career educator an advantage? What outcome expectations did second-career educators experience? How do participants describe the benefits of participating in an alternative certification path to a new career as

teachers? The central question was: How do alternatively certified educators describe their teaching profession experiences and perceptions in the first five years?

The first research question was: How has self-efficacy given the second-career educator an advantage? An analysis of data sources centered on research question one identified one theme and two sub-themes. The theme was confidence, and the sub-themes were: (a) confidence from the first career and (b) naturally acquired self-efficacy.

The first of the two sub-themes were confidence from the first career. Each of the 11 participants shared how they were considered a highly skilled part of the workforce. Each participant was acknowledged for performing beyond job requirements and excelling in leadership roles. Some participants spoke of disappointing encounters and added how they faced and overcame hurdles in their own way. Most participants noted they never accepted defeat.

The second sub-theme was naturally acquired self-efficacy. Each participant indicated that they experienced complex personal and social events along their timeline before entering their second career. The difficult personal and social events mentioned included job downsizing, loss of family members, relocation, divorce, profit loss, household funds, and family additions. However, the common thread shared by each participant was hearing and following an inner voice that told them to keep pushing. Another standard thought process of the participants was that their self-efficacy increased as they pushed on and gained more strength and confidence.

The second research question supported theme nine and attempted to discover anticipated positive and negative consequences were experienced in the first three to five years. The positive outcome expectations were: (a) a genuine commitment to continuous learning, (b) willingness to master the alternative certification protocols, (c) anticipation of improving craft through

engagement in professional development, (d) the added value of additional degrees and certifications, (e) a feeling of purpose accomplished, (f) a sense of belonging, (g) more self-awareness, (h) increasing hands-on ability, (i) expanding management capacity, and (j) expertise expansion.

The adverse outcomes participants mentioned included a few unfavorable experiences with administration. Some participants felt it unfortunate to have worked under newly appointed administrators. They noted that administrators new to the leadership role were rigid and not open to a shared model of leading. Only a few participants shared a negative outcome directly connected to the alternative certification. These participants spoke negatively of the process of becoming alternatively certified in two ways. Some recalled having to do their research, and some recalled spending their own money to further their livelihood. An additional negative outcome shared was having to pivot and adjust one's mindset. However, all participants shared the same sentiment that they had no regrets, positive outcomes outweighed the negative ones and that gaining certification remained the overall goal.

The third research question supported theme ten. All individuals reported benefiting personally, professionally, and socially-emotionally from changing over to a new career. Most mentioned receiving the personal benefit of financial stability and the added safeguard of health insurance that came with certification. Professional benefits included additional training and degrees derived from the rigor of the alternative certification requirements. Participants remembered feeling good about the necessity of additional schooling. Some participants shared that their first careers in human services and psychology prepared them socially and emotionally better to manage student behaviors and co-worker differences of opinions. Other participants

who had previous experience and training in art, music, deaf studies, technology, and even the military, were social-emotionally prepared to manage their mental, physical, and emotional well-being and those of others. Participants added that they adapted quickly to the new school community and diverse cultures and felt a sense of personal value. All participants viewed themselves as positive role models and problem solvers.

### **Discussion**

Research on alternatively certified second career educators is limited but is of great importance to the larger body of literature that addresses teacher shortages and school districts and human resource departments. Therefore, this research was developed to understand and highlight the lived experiences of alternatively certified educators. In addition, this research study expanded on the perspectives of second-career educators who remained as teachers and who advanced to higher levels in the field. The researcher discovered, through this study, that alternatively certified educators remained in teaching beyond the first three to five years for four main reasons: (a) a strong sense of self-efficacy, (b) the positive outcomes, (c) participants' personalities, and (d) personal fulfillment. These findings supported Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory (SCT), and it served as an extension of Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994, 1996, 1999) social cognitive career theory (SCCT) in the school environment.

### **Theoretical Literature**

The theoretical framework used to guide this study was Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986, 2001) and Lent, Brown, and Hackett's social cognitive career theory (1994, 1996, 1999). The social cognitive theory is a knowledge of one's own learning and behavioral management due to interactions in social settings (Bandura, 2001). SCT is believed to be the most commonly

used theory used in psychology and studies centered on educational topics (Beauchamp et al., 2019). Bandura (2001) believed that as people interacted with other people, they learned how to relate, respond, and move forward by what they saw and how they were made to feel. Bandura also believed that actions were fed by previous experiences (Beauchamp et al., 2019). This study provided solid examples of how positive and sometimes negative interactions among new and seasoned teachers and their environment and administrators advanced or curtailed participants' behaviors.

Alternatively certified second career educators and why they stayed in teaching was the focus of this study. Although the existing literature was few, literature found revealed that social experiences affected upward movement and stability, decision-making, and comfortability (Bertrand, 2019; Green, 2015; Griffin, 2018). According to Beauchamp et al. (2019), SCT leads to self-reflection and self-evaluation behaviors. Also captured in SCT was self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to overcome and succeed regardless of the obstacle (Bandura, 2001).

Previous research surmised that self-efficacy played a significant role in an individual's goals (Bertrand, 2019; Green, 2015; Griffin, 2018). The theory that self-efficacy played a formative role in goal setting and goal achievement was proven in this study. Each participant in this study acknowledged that they factored in their capabilities and self-confidence when they decided to move to and stay in education.

Bandura (2001) believed that individuals interact in a small or large group based on the behaviors of others. For example, if the group's actions were adverse, the individual's reactions would also be negative. Similarly, if the group's actions were favorable toward the individual, then the individual's response would be fair in return. Beauchamp et al. (2019) believed that

individuals were creatures who desired social environments over isolation to matriculate through. Similarly, Bertrand (2019) felt that individuals interact with others commensurate with their self-confidence. Griffin (2018) determined that the SCT was an canopy to confidence, competence, social interaction, and learning. In conclusion, through the social cognitive theory lens, the phenomenon of alternatively certified second-career educators' lived experiences and why they stayed past the probationary years was able to be fittingly examined.

Social cognitive career theory is the second theory that framed this study. So devised, originally in 1994 by Lent et al., it was based on Bandura's social cognitive theory. Social cognitive career theory encompassed self-efficacy, outcome expectation, and personal goals as its attributes (Lent et al., 1994). According to McElhaney (2016), a person with self-efficacy manages challenges with tenacity, set and attain goals, and is self-motivated. Beauchamp et al. (2019) added that an individual's self-efficacy enables them to take risks easily. Bjerke and Solomon (2019) added that teachers' self-efficacy played a significant role in their level of success in the field and, ultimately, their determination to overcome obstacles.

Another sub-component of social cognitive career theory is outcome expectation (Lent & Brown, 1996; Lent et al., 1994; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999; Richardson-Spears, 2018). If an individual was concerned with the consequences of a task, that individual was said to be operating with outcome expectations in mind. Richardson-Spears (2018) echoed the deduction that individuals were driven by their thoughts of a negative or positive consequence. An example of outcome expectation is exemplified in the work setting when individuals pick up social cues and abide by social norms (Lent et al., 1994). Lent et al. (1994) added that the work setting

manipulated behaviors and made individuals set boundaries by the pitfalls they saw their colleagues fall into.

Personal goals were followed up as the third component of social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994). In the early years of school, students were expected to achieve certain milestones. Their goals were made for them. When individuals mature and enter the workplace, they are expected to set and achieve their personal goals. As per Beauchamp et al. (2019), individuals are creatures of goal setting and achievement, and previous milestones and social influences help them envision where they can arrive. This study broadened the understanding of the emphasis of outcome expectations and personal goals of second-career educators. This study also revealed why second-career educators pushed themselves to earn additional degrees and training beyond what was required for the initial career.

### **Empirical Literature**

Some studies have highlighted the upward trending problem of the teacher shortage (Donitsa-Schmidt & Zuzovsky, 2016; Redding & Smith, 2016). Others have attempted to pinpoint why teacher attrition is increasing at an alarming rate (Beauchamp et al., 2019; Bertrand, 2019; McElroy, 2019). However, few studies have covered the teacher shortage efforts with alternative certification options (Bowling & Ball, 2018; Brenner et al., 2018). This study recognized the introduction of second-career educators to solve the teacher shortage and presented their stories and perspectives. This study also added to the body of empirical literature that addressed the experiences, motivations, and influences surrounding alternatively certified teachers (Choi et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2017).

The introduction of second-career educators played a significant role in addressing the teacher shortage. Second-career educators, also known as alternatively certified educators, grew to become a new workforce (Mentzer et al., 2019). This new teacher workforce affected human resource agencies and policymakers. Alternatively certified educators also supported principals, new and seasoned teachers, and ultimately students with their existence (Gelfer et al., 2015). According to McNew-Birren et al. (2018), most of those coming into teaching were second-career educators.

This study revealed alternatively certified educators' influence on human resource agencies and district personnel. Ms. Brown, who was first employed as a teaching assistant, set a certification goal. Ms. Brown had to gather all the information for certification on her own. On the one hand, she became well-versed in the available resources. On the other hand, the school district's hiring department saw that Ms. Brown was a valuable asset and needed to update their outreach processes. Ms. Brown and the school district reached a win-win situation when they considered letting her advance to a certified teacher status at her current location once her teacher credential requirements were met.

According to Gelfer et al. (2015), as time went on and with research, alternatively certified educators became more and more visible. The attention school districts had given to alternatively certified educators was catching the eye of policymakers (Gelfer et al., 2015; Mentzer et al. (2019). According to Mentzer et al. (2019), states began to expand their hiring policies. All graduate majors were welcomed. Some candidates with specific backgrounds were placed in schools speedily (Butler, 2018). More than a handful of alternative teacher certification

programs were established (Butler, 2018). As per Butler (2018), policies were put in place to expand alternative certification programs in a few years.

Dr. Hannah shared that although he came to education with a finance background and no educational experience, his willingness to advance his studies was extraordinarily rewarded. Under the promotion policy when he became a teacher, the usual process to reach leadership status was rigid and lengthy. First, the process included teaching for a certain number of years. The next step was to enroll in a specific leadership cohort for a particular time. Following acceptance in the leadership cohort, candidates would be placed in a pool of applicants. In just a few years, Dr. Hannah and Pee Dee were so sought after and fast-tracked to leadership status, with some restrictions waived.

Alternative certification influenced principals looking to fill vacancies, teacher colleagues, and students. According to Gelfer et al. (2015), principals found second-career educators' motivation toward collaboration refreshing. In his role as a parent educator, Pee Dee recalled how valued he felt when he was elected to help make decisions for the school. He added that his personality and work ethic was "infections," and for that reason, he was often given projects to oversee. Ant Gray and Michelle C., while working as substitutes at their respective schools, so impressed their principals with their management and organizational skills and were asked by their principals to apply for vacancies.

According to research, second-career educators are influencers (Bertrand, 2019; Sawchuk, 2013). Stanton (2017) described alternatively certified educators as skilled professionals who brought necessary functional and organizational skills. Rose and Sughrue (2020) termed alternatively certified educators as the go-to professionals for presenting new

concepts. Music Man reported that what his colleagues appreciated about him most were his optimistic attitude and his capacity to build others up. Savvy noted that her colleagues counted on her to bring innovative thinking to the table. As a result, savvy was often selected to represent the grade level during professional development opportunities. Finally, Ant Gray was praised as someone to watch for managing challenging students.

Few studies documented the effects alternative certification had on student achievement. Teach for America was celebrated as the cutting-edge teacher preparation program (Moore, 2018). According to Moore (2-18), second-career educators who enrolled in the program successfully increased student achievement in their schools. The research on the effects of alternative certification on student achievement was limited. However, personal stories of positive student interactions were revealed.

This study revealed that alternatively certified educators were influential in students' educational and social-emotional development. Funnily, when participants described their initial interactions with students, some acknowledged nervousness. However, participants noted that when they replaced their fears with their personalities, they fared better in the day-to-day interactions. All participants shared heartwarming stories of their students. Music Man said that kept the instruction and classroom mood "jovial." He believed that his humor eliminated the monotony and kept his students engaged. Music Man shared how he was informally voted "most popular teacher on the staff." He concluded that his goal was to promote student engagement, but he became popular in the process. Savvy was such a hard worker. She stayed long hours at the school and dedicated her time to her lessons. Students jokingly thought she lived at the school. Ant Gray's perception of herself was that she was stern. However, her students loved her and felt

that she loved them in return. Dr. Hannah and Pee Dee shared that their teaching style was unconventional but effective. Building rapport and increasing student engagement was a high priority for them.

### **Implications**

The research goal was to investigate, identify, and describe the lived experiences of second-career educators. The current study's findings provided a voice for individuals with no formal teacher training to share how they assimilated to a new career and thrived. The results can also inform the practices of policymakers, school district personnel, and community partnerships looking to strengthen the school-community connections. The implications of this study are essential in the following ways:

1. This study highlighted the personal events and experiences that caused individuals with no teacher training to assimilate to a position as a second-career educator and find success.
2. This study pinpointed potential ways for principals, school districts, and policymakers to alleviate the teacher shortage dilemma.
3. This study explored the school-level initiatives that had the most substantial impact on longevity for second-career educators.
4. This study provided additional data, evidence of best practices in job satisfaction, and a springboard for future studies of alternatively certified educators.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Given the background of the study, various guiding theories spoke to the purpose and process of increasing teacher retention. However, the theories most applicable to a study centered

on success in teaching as a second career were Bandura's (1986, 2001) social cognitive theory and Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (Lent et al., 1994) social cognitive career theory. Two theories, social cognitive theory (SCT) and social cognitive career theory (SCCT) provided clear explanations for how influences shaped individuals. These influences both inwardly and outwardly influence work habits, job satisfaction, and productivity. Additionally, social influences impact where people choose to settle to work. A group's sentiments affect how long people work where they work. In addition, the function of self-efficacy in teacher attrition is a focus that this study yields (Beauchamp et al., 2019; Bertrand, 2019; McElroy, 2019). Together, these theories provided a framework for exploring how present and past social experiences shaped longevity in a second career for second career educators.

Bandura's (1986, 2001) SCT originated from behavioral psychology and cognitive psychology. The study substantiated an important and observable concept known as social conditioning. According to several of the participants' interview transcripts, decisions to stay in the second career were supported and influenced by social interactions with students, coworkers, and administrators in the buildings where they worked (Beauchamp, Crawford, & Jackson, 2019; Green, 2015; Osborne, 2018; Stelly, 2020). Another observable connection to teaching under an alternative license drawn from participants' interviews was evidence of self-efficacy. According to McElhaney (2016), self-efficacy is identified as having an ability to face challenges, persevere, self-motivate while setting and attaining goals. Bandura (2001) additionally acknowledged that a relationship between social cognitive theory and self-efficacy existed.

The parallel theory that supported this study was social cognitive career theory (SCCT). The SCCT is grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory (Lent et al., 1994) and was first

pushed through as an extension of social cognitive theory to broaden the understanding of how individuals adapt and thrive to new workplaces. Much like social cognitive theory, social cognitive career theory embraces self-efficacy as a measure for determining how well individuals adjust to career changes. As Bertrand (2019) explained, self-efficacy is a mindset to self-motivate and envision an ending that is full of success. According to Educational Research (2019), self-efficacy is an attitude or psychological tendency of an individual to see himself as perpetually successful.

Several examples of participants' self-efficacy and outcome expectations were communicated through this study. The participants in this study each shared stories of struggle, loss, and seeming setbacks. Additionally, participants also shared stories of triumph, accomplishments, and have overcome challenges. All participants noted that they found teaching a better fit for them. Several participants reported being recognized by their colleagues and administrators as someone who should be in a leadership role. Some participants stated that they had no desire to form a clique. They credited their social adeptness for how comfortably they assimilated to new people, new settings, and a new role. Coworkers described them as supportive, resourceful, and encouraging. Some coworkers labeled the second-career educators as problem solvers. Some participants joked that they were often expected to be the ones to volunteer themselves to be resident enlistees.

With little to no formal teacher training, these second-career educators exuded tenacity and grace in situations of uncertainty. As reported by participants, among their strengths were the ability to make sound decisions, set and maintain measurable goals, forge positive interactions, be self-disciplined, persevere, and work under limited supervision. After a careful, in-depth

observation of the participants' stories, it was clear cut that these individuals thrived as predicted by social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

### **Empirical Implications**

Historically, according to Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver (2020; 2021), teacher shortages in elementary and secondary schools became a concern nationally. The teacher shortages rose because educators were leaving the profession, for various reasons, at a startling rate (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). This trend has gone on for more than 20 years (Carter, 2021). Additionally, the dilemma has forced districts and hiring entities to boost recruitment and retention efforts by offering alternatives to certification (Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). Subsequently, alternative routes to certification have attracted new prospects, with little to no educational training, to teaching (Matsko et al., 2021).

A little more than a handful of studies have recorded the lived experiences of alternatively certified educators (Bowling & Ball, 2018; Brenner et al., 2018; Certification Map, 2019; Harrell et al., 2019; Hopkins et al., 2019; Thompson & Brooks, 2019). Even fewer studies have identified alternatively certified educators' day-to-day practices and experiences (Ball, 2016). This study, through the central question, supported new findings. For example, this study found that all the second career educators who participated in the study remained in teaching longer than they did in their first careers. Another finding was that each participant experienced and spoke of a natural ability to bring thriving strategies from the first to the second career and succeed.

A positive outcome, sustained in this study and substantiated by recent studies, is that school districts have come to embrace alternatively certified educators because they have

brought academic and cultural diversity to their schools (Kwok & Cain 2021; Matsko et al., 2021). Kwok and Cain (2021) confirmed that schools now have highly skilled individuals entering their doors that may never have considered teaching if not for alternative certification. Matsko et al. (2021) contended that close to one out of five teachers nationwide are alternatively certified today. Participants reported making a successful change-over despite having little or no prior training in teaching. They credited their strong sense of self-awareness and expanded their growth ability to flourish. Participants shared that they collectively and willingly engaged in ongoing professional development to be the best at their craft. All participants felt a sense of belonging and a realization of having more to give.

### **Practical Implications**

The critical attributes of Alternative Certification Programs concerning teachers' feelings and perceptions, specifically regarding their success in a classroom, were explored in this research study. This study concluded the connection between the alternative certification experience and a first-year teacher's self-efficacy. For this reason, Bandura's self-efficacy theory served as the theoretical framework from which data collected were analyzed. Additionally, the second-career educator's feelings and perceptions of success in the educational system, a system foreign to them, were also deemed aspects of self-efficacy, summarily defined as confidence (McElhaney, 2016).

There are four key components that Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1997) incorporated: mastery experience, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional and physiological states. According to Bourne et al. (2021), researchers of these components agreed that the most impactful source of self-efficacy was mastery experience. Returning to the lens of

Bandura's (1997) mastery experience, it was decided that second-career educators gained self-efficacy through mastering a task or controlling an environment. In addition, strong efficacy beliefs, as substantiated by personal stories, were directly correlated to personal mastery in a previous career.

Colleagues of alternatively certified educators may find practical significance in the results of this study:

1. As supported by participants' responses, teachers found their second-career associates to be upbeat, motivating, and resourceful.
2. Teachers looked to second-career educators for ideas and unique ways to interact with their students. Teachers also applauded the creative classroom management techniques second-career educators employed. This claim was supported by data from interviews with alternatively certified educators.
3. Participants' mastery experience correlated directly to time and experience in their first careers.

Other practical implications of this study include the connections that can be made between the community and the school. At least four participants in the study shared how they had made connections with schools in their community by working as a volunteer, parent helper, or business owner or affiliate. In addition, this study provides practical implications for school-level leadership. Administrators can count on and embrace second-career educators' versatility as a strength. Looking ahead, school leaders and administrators may find this study to be of practical importance because of the emphasis on self-efficacy. In addition, school leaders

and administrators will find that alternatively certified educators' self-efficacy is an intrinsic motivator (Bertrand, 2019; McElhaney, 2016).

Additionally, this study will appeal to school districts and policymakers looking to promote programs designed to appeal to professionals in careers outside of teaching. Finally, most of the participants shared that their students felt that they went above and beyond by bringing new and creative ideas to the classroom and by supporting and celebrating their extracurricular activities. Participant's students added that they felt empowered when their teacher would share encouraging stories.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are purposeful decisions the researcher makes to limit or define the study's boundaries. For this reason, a qualitative phenomenological design was chosen to understand second-career educators and their experiences within and beyond the first years. Participants in the study were required to be alternatively certified. Having alternative certification was a limitation because, as it stands, teacher retention has been an issue even for teachers who matriculated through teacher training courses in their undergraduate years. Changing careers is both exciting and frightening. Yet, becoming a second-career educator continues to set trends.

Learning about second-career educators' lived experiences, especially positive experiences, is vital information for those who hire, support, and supervise them. Knowledge of the second-career educator's challenges will lead to better recruiting and training efforts. Each participant had a first career that was not in teaching. Each participant gained certification to teach through an alternate route, whether by taking an exam, earning additional degrees, or enrolling in and passing specific courses. Limiting the study to only alternatively certified

educators made it possible to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative route to teaching that was revealed in the study.

For this study, participants needed to be 26 years old. One reason for this age criteria was to solidify that the participants were adults, had acquired a degree, or had experienced a previous career. According to Gervis (2019), developing an adult identity involves going through a series of events. Settersten et al. (2015) added that most adults would not have undergone enough experiences to level out their decision-making skills until age 25 or above. Furstenberg (2015) concluded that certain adult milestones were not achieved until 25 or older.

Another criterion for the study was that participants had to remain in teaching for at least three to five years. Most teachers are provided support for the first three years because the first few years are seen as probationary years. In some settings, teachers were not evaluated in the first few years (Thomsen, 2014). Finally, and as condensed by Wilhelm et al. (2021), teachers' self-efficacy approaches development after the first three years of teaching.

One limitation in the study surfaced. The limitation associated with the study was due to the qualitative design of the study. The study sample included teachers in a district in a specific region of the state. This limitation hindered transferability. Had the study been open to alternatively certified participants in other states, the data could have been more diverse in terms of individuals' backgrounds and not so controlled.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Some recommendations and directions for future research were made considering the findings, limitations, and delimitations from this study. Generally speaking, the researcher explored the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators

in urban elementary schools in South Carolina. While the semi-controlled group in this study provided usable data, the data was subjected to and benefitted only one geographical region within the United States. For example, the study's area is primarily agricultural, military, and tourism centered. A suggestion for future research would be to broaden the regional data band by opening the study to alternatively certified elementary school teachers in select states across the country. Widening the regional data band could expand the findings, incorporate more diverse participants' backgrounds, and reveal a trend of career tracks. A broader regional selection pool or strategically selected group would reveal more career options, and divulge more stories of diversity.

Another suggestion for future research would be to lower the age for participants to 22 or eliminate the age limit if chosen. Some professionals may have entered their career journey before they were 18 years old. Some professionals may have obtained associate degrees and entered their first careers. Lowering the age limit to 22 would allow these outliers' experiences to be included. It would be vital not to miss the account of a professional who completed a two-year college degree program and moved into a career sooner and whose job experience counted toward their certification because of an age limit that was set too high.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina. Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory and Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994, 1996, 1999) social cognitive career theory guided this theory in allowing participants to describe their varied experiences during the first years of teaching to the present. In addition, a

phenomenological methodology allowed alternatively certified educators to have a voice to tell their story of assimilation to teach as a second career. Eleven professionals participated in the study. The participants described their lived experiences through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. A third data collection method, archival records, was used to determine similarities, differences, and unique data associated with the alternative certification experiences.

Data analysis included Moustakas's (1994) horizontalizing, bracketing, coding by themes, clustering the data into themes, and organizing the themes into a coherent textural and structural description. In addition, steps were taken to deem themes as applicable, consider multiple perspectives, and categorize the data into how and what context. Finally, the data analysis concluded several important implications. One crucial significance of the data analysis, in particular, connected traditionally trained teachers' retention rate with the hiring of alternatively certified teachers. The participants reported being a support to their traditionally trained colleagues as well as being supported by them. Another implication was that alternatively certified educators found purpose when they switched to the second career. In another sense, participants found that their second career supported their financial and social obligations to the same degree or more than the first career. Lastly, participants reported building lasting relationships with students, parents, and colleagues despite their limited educational experience and training.

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**APPENDIX or APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A: IRB APPLICATION

### Liberty University IRB Approval

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

### IRB APPLICATION CHECKLIST

Use the checklist below to make sure you have submitted the necessary documents to the IRB:

I have completed the necessary [CITI Training](#). (You may submit your application prior to completing CITI Training, however the IRB will not be able to approve your research until CITI Training is completed).

- **Please note:** You do not need to send the IRB your CITI completion certificate. The IRB receives reports automatically and verifies CITI training during the review process.

If applicable, I have created the following supplemental documents ([templates](#)) and attached them to my [Cayuse IRB](#) application as separate Word documents\*:

Permission Request Letter(s)

Recruitment Materials:

- ✓ Letter(s)
- ✓ Announcement(s)
- ✓ Social Media Post(s)
- ✓ Email(s)
- ✓ Flyer(s)
- ✓ Verbal/Phone Script(s)
- ✓ Follow-Up(s)

Consent Materials:

- ✓ Consent Form(s)
- ✓ Child Assent Form(s)
- ✓ Parental Consent Form(s)
- ✓ Debriefing Form(s)

Instruments:

- ✓ Survey Questions
- ✓ Questionnaires
- ✓ Interview Questions
- ✓ Focus Group Questions
- ✓ Other Test/Assessment Material

If applicable, I have attached proof of permission (as a letter, or email response) to my Cayuse IRB application.

I have submitted my application and the above supplemental documents to the IRB through Cayuse IRB ([liberty.cayuse424.com](mailto:liberty.cayuse424.com)).

**Please note:** Proof of permission and proprietary instruments may be submitted as PDFs.

If you are unable to access Cayuse IRB, please contact the IRB, [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

### APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

#### CONSENT FORM

**Title of the Project:** A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Alternatively Certified Second-Career Educators

**Principal Investigator:** Alison L Harmon, Liberty University School of Education

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. You are invited to be in a research study of lived experiences of alternatively certified teachers in South Carolina. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a South Carolina alternatively certified teacher who is over the age of 26 years and who has taught for at least three to five years with an alternative license. It is also believed that you have experienced the phenomena of alternative certification, and you are the main person or one of the main persons responsible for communicating your experience. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators in urban elementary schools in South Carolina.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete an initial online survey (15 minutes).
2. Participate in a semi-structured virtual or face-to-face interview. This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be audio recorded.
3. Participate in a recorded online asynchronous focus group. This will allow the researcher to ask for clarification of information from the interviews or for the participant to give additional information that he or she may have thought of after the interview. It will begin with specific questions. This step should take 30 to 45 minutes overall.
4. Participants will submit artifacts that they believe may be pertinent to the study. These artifacts can include anything pertaining to teaching under alternative certification such as contact logs, communication policies, etc. This step should take no greater than 15 to 30 minutes.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include facilitating awareness of the second-career educator's challenges, leading to better recruiting and training efforts, helping close the teaching shortage, alleviating it somehow, and informing educational policies.

#### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely with password protection on a computer or in a locked cabinet in the home, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data from this study will be collected and kept under a pseudonym. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Interviews/focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer or in a locked cabinet for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

#### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study. The researcher will request email addresses only for follow-up purposes; however, they will be pulled and separated from your responses to maintain your anonymity.

#### **What are the costs to you to be part of the study?**

There is no cost to participate in the study.

#### **Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?**

To limit potential or perceived conflicts the study will be anonymous, so the researcher will not know who participated. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Alison Harmon. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at XXX or XXX. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. XXX, at cXXXu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

### Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

### Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant & Date

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Signature of Investigator & Date

## APPENDIX C: STANDARDIZED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Standardized Interview Questions

#### Central Question

*How do alternatively certified educators describe their experiences and perceptions of the teaching profession in the first five years?*

#### **Interview Questions**

1. Please tell me your academic background and how your career led you to your current position as a teacher.
2. What are your long-term goals in teaching?
3. Describe your personality.
4. Of the formative experiences you identified on your timeline, which would you say were the most significant?
5. What made these experiences significant?
6. What was your college experience like?
7. How would you describe the alternative certification application experience prior to getting placed in a school?
8. What are your suggestions for enhancing the alternative certification process?
9. How did you develop practical skills required in the classroom setting?
10. What sparked your interest in becoming a teacher through an alternative certification route?
11. What previous experiences do you feel prepared you to teach?
12. Describe your mentoring experience in the alternative certification process.

13. What would you want to tell a newly certified second-career educator to expect to experience?
14. How would you help the next alternatively certified teacher transition to the new role?
15. What else do you think would be important for me to know about your experience as an alternatively certified educator?
16. What else do you think would be important for me to know about your experience as an alternatively certified educator?
17. If needed, can we meet again for clarification follow up? What would be your preference?  
E-mail, telephone, face-to-face, or virtual meet?

## **APPENDIX D: STANDARDIZED FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

### Standardized Focus Group Questions

1. What were your main motivations for becoming a second-career educator? (Kokiko, 2009).
2. What were the challenges faced as a new teacher with alternative certification? (Bjerke & Solomon, 2019).
3. What are the rewards of being an alternatively certified teacher? (Osborne, 2018).
4. How would describe your transition from your previous to this career? (Bertrand, 2019).
5. What are some ways you developed career goals as a means to manage outcome expectations as you transitioned into your new career as a teacher? (Osborne, 2018).

## APPENDIX E: SURVEY

### A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Alternatively Certified Second-Career Educators

1. Name or Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Did you take an alternative route to teaching? \_\_\_\_ Yes
3. Prior to teaching, did you attend and complete any alternative certification training?  
\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No
4. Have you taught for three to five years or more? \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No
5. If you entered teaching with an alternative certification license, your current profession is in education, and you stayed in teaching for three to five years or more, are you willing to participate in other phases of this study? \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No
6. Name or Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_  
Email address \_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone Number(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete by \_\_\_\_\_. The survey can be accessed by copying and pasting the following link into your browser: <https://forms.gle/WuhodD8RuWAXn9>

Link to the consent form:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HeuUCMZWvJkBWugjjtdIaa-UHS/view?usp=sharing>

## APPENDIX F: EMAIL REQUEST FOR MEETING

Hello Teachers,

My name is Alison Harmon and I have been approved by the district to conduct research. As a doctoral student at Liberty University, I am currently conducting research to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of alternatively certified second-career educators. I am contacting you to invite you to participate in my research.

To participate, you must have entered teaching through an alternative certification route, have at least five years' experience teaching under an alternative license, and be 26 years or older. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a brief screening survey to determine eligibility for the study.

After I verify that participants meet the qualifications for the study, I will schedule virtual interviews with qualifying participants. You will also receive a request to share personal archival records with the researcher by email. Participants will sign, scan, or take a picture with a camera phone and return forms by email or by bringing the original with them to the interview.

Next, I will conduct interviews with a focus group. I will hold virtual meetings through Google Meet and face-to-face and record them, with permission granted. Data and recordings will be stored and protected by a password. Interview and focus group data will be collected with recording devices and put through a program called Transcribe. Transcribe will permit the audio to be recorded by a computer microphone and then translated into text. Recorded data responses will be examined in-depth as part of the analysis process. Your name and other information will be requested as part of the study, but all information gathered will remain confidential.

To help in finding individuals that may be interested in assisting me, I ask that you complete the screening survey as soon as possible. The screening survey can be accessed by copying and pasting the following link into your browser: <https://forms.gle/WuhoRuWAXn9>. If you are interested in participating, please complete the screening survey by \_\_\_\_\_.

If you are selected to participate in the study, I will contact you to schedule an interview. You will also be asked to sign and return the consent document. The consent document is linked here for reference:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HeuUCMZWvJkBrd4tI7dIaa-UHS/view?usp=sharing>

If there are any questions, my email address is XXXdu.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Alison Harmon

APPENDIX G: CITE APPROVAL FORM



August 20, 2021

Allison Harmon  
[Redacted]

Re: Research Application

Allison,

The Richland School District Two research committee has approved your application to conduct research in our district. You must complete all research activities by October 15, 2021. You will need to request an extension from the research committee if you need to continue research activities beyond that date. Please remember the committee reserves the right to terminate the study at any time if circumstances change or the members feel it is in the best interest of our students, their families, or staff.

I will contact the Richland Two elementary school principals to inform them that you have been given permission to conduct research in our district. Principals always have final approval of all research activity conducted on their campus and may deny permission to conduct research even if the proposal has been approved by the district's research committee. Do not contact elementary teachers directly. Each principal who feels it would be appropriate for their campus, will inform their teachers of your research and provide them with the survey link. The remaining weeks of the school year are very busy. I will ask principals to delay discussing this research or forwarding the survey link until the final teacher workday for the 2020-2021 school. This workday is scheduled for Saturday, June 12.

Please remember that participation in research activities by district employees is always voluntary and at their own discretion. Finally, you must submit a copy of all final reports, dissertations, or publications based on this research to me upon completion of your study.

Please feel free to contact me if you need additional information or assistance. Thank you for your patience. Respectfully,

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Director of Accountability and Assessment

Location [Redacted]