

Impacting Student Achievement: Switching Careers to Education

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Abstract

Seasoned adults are finding that a career change to education supports personal goals as well as impacts student achievement. This qualitative mini-case study examines three teachers' life experiences and influences that led them to the path of becoming a teacher as a career switcher. The preliminary findings identified through this study suggest that four emerging themes were identified during the review of the five distinct categories of data collection. The four themes include: (1) career switchers positively remember their former teachers who made an impact on them, (2) their initial careers had a teaching component, (3) their decision to change careers was due to a calling or to seek fulfillment, and (4) qualities of former teachers mirror those of the participants. Data was collected from three participants over a one-month time period. Conclusions, results, emerging themes, and recommendations are also offered.

Keywords: Teaching, education, career switcher, student achievement

Introduction

When one announces that they are to become a teacher, most people immediately think that a young college student, preparing for graduation, has made the announcement. However, a growing number of beginning teachers are career switchers, who have completed a licensed career switcher program or the necessary requirements to obtain a teacher's license. "Teaching is a popular pursuit among many second-generation career-seekers. Millions . . . in their 40s, 50s, and beyond are just beginning to look for encore careers that offer personal meaning, an opportunity to contribute to society, and the pay and benefits they need to sustain their way of life" (Freedman & Goggin, 2008, p. 34). Krecic and Grmek (2005) found that reasons that influenced people to switch to the profession of teaching included public function for the whole society, becoming an example to children and young people to impact student achievement.

Some colleges and universities throughout the nation have implemented career switcher programs, such as the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). Schwieder, a Harvard graduate, decided to move in a new direction as he approached his fiftieth birthday. "I wanted to be a teacher," reports Schwider, ". . . I want to help kids learn to love math as much as I do" (Freedman & Goggin, 2008, p.34). The program design is meant for adults who already hold a bachelor's degree, have at least five years of work experience, and whose lifestyle of flexibility and convenience can put them on a fast track to teacher licensure (Freedman & Goggin, 2008, p.35). It is further reported by Freedman and Goggin (2008) that "Principals love working with encore teachers because of the life experience and enthusiasm they bring to the classroom" (p.36). "Effective teaching is not intuitive. Whether new teachers come to the classroom as a second career or directly from a teacher education program, they all share the need for support and belonging" (Watkins, 2005, p.83). The career switcher programs have developed in recent years to fill the shortages of teachers and to help individuals fill their dreams.

Research Questions

This study sought to understand the life experiences and other factors that influenced three individuals in switching careers to teaching, a phenomenological interviewing approach to data collection was used. The foreshadowed questions are the broad questions that oversee the whole research problem.

The three questions that emerged as the foreshadowed questions focused on the reasons why three individuals chose to switch careers, and served as a guide for the researcher and were adjusted during the study to reflect the anticipated research that would be found during data collection. The three foreshadowed questions included: (1) What influences led you to think about another career in teaching? (2) How was your first career similar to teaching? and (3) How does your current teaching style compare and contrast with the teachers that made an impact on you?

Methodology

A phenomenological study was used to analyze and describe the experiences of three individuals and to make sense of their individual and collective experiences in making the decision to switch careers to teaching. Since all three participants share a similar experience in switching careers, the phenomenology study was appropriate to focus on one shared phenomenon to understand in depth (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Creswell, 2007).

The purposeful sampling approach is used in qualitative research to select participants who the researchers believe will facilitate their understanding of the case study. For this particular mini-study, purposeful sampling out of convenience was used to select the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). It was important to interview current teachers who had once held a different career outside of teaching and chose to become teachers at a later date. The researcher had met several career switchers in her years of education, but she did not want to limit it to friends or acquaintances. The three participants were selected from a list generated by an electronic mail message sent to neighboring schools. There were a total of fifteen respondents who had switched careers, and the researcher chose three different participants who varied by gender, age, and current teaching assignments, and they were willing to share their life experiences and influences with the researcher in terms of the reasons they switched careers. Research participation approval was granted by the local school system.

The researcher's principal role was that of the interviewer. During an audio-taped interview, participants were asked questions which focused on why they chose to pursue teaching as a second career. The questions were open-ended which allowed for more in-depth responses, and at times, the participants' answers allowed for more probing questions.

The researcher used an interview guide to facilitate each of the three interviews. Four questions were related to demographic information, and eight open-ended questions were developed for this analysis. At times, the order of the questions varied, depending on how the conversation flowed with each participant, but the researcher chose to keep the order of the first and last questions to come "full circle" with the participants in terms of characteristics or qualities of an effective or favorite teacher. The researcher thought this was an important distinction. Furthermore, the researcher did not rush the participants in their responses due to the reflective nature of the questions. Many of the questions were those that asked for their memories of events, and plenty of time was given for reflection and elaboration.

The participants all teach in a large school division in central Virginia, and the majority of their students are considered to be of families with average- to high-income range. Of the participants, two were female and one was male. The male has only been teaching for four years, and the female teachers had similar years of experience of ten years each. The male teaches Mathematics and has both bachelor's and masters degrees; one of the females teaches Social Studies and has a bachelor's degree, and the other female teaches English having completed both bachelors and master's degrees. All three teachers have taught varying levels of students, from special education students to gifted students.

All interviews were kept as separate word document files in Microsoft Word, and the files were saved on a laptop computer as well as a removable disk. The analysis of the transcribed interviews, from coding to comparing and contrasting, was completed by the researcher instead of a qualitative research software program.

Throughout the interview process, the researcher included observer comments in the transcriptions, and began a non-in-depth, but general analysis of each interview looking for emerging themes, during the discovery phase. When the researcher coded the interviews, she used the process of deconstructing the meaning of the interviews. After all three interviews were transcribed and coded; a more in-depth analysis was completed by categorizing the recurring ideas and major themes. It was during this process that the researcher looked for substantive and conclusive themes using the methods of contrast and comparison and developing shared meanings and experiences of the participants.

Results/Findings

All three participants chose teaching as a second career. Their college education and respective degrees were not related to education, and therefore, decided to pursue another career upon their college graduation. It was an average of ten years before all three participants decided to pursue teaching as a second career. Although the participants may not realize the similarities in their pursuit, all three teach at a suburban middle school in a large school division in the state of Virginia.

The school division is one that has grown in reputation and in enrollment over the past fifteen years largely due to its increase in student achievement in standardized test scores and overall rigorous curriculum. The middle school is relatively new, and its enrollment is expected to rapidly grow in the next few years due to an increase in housing developments around the area. Currently the middle school enrollment is approximately 900 students, ranging from sixth through eighth grade. Fourteen percent of the students receive special education services, and 35% of the students are in advanced courses, ranging from accelerated mathematics classes to foreign language classes. The ethnicity of the student population is predominantly white, making up 86% of the population, and the other 14% of the population are either African-American, Hispanic or Asian students. Furthermore, the socio-economic backgrounds of the students vary. A large percentage of the students come from two-parent families, living in suburban one-family homes. A small percentage of the students live with only one parent or with relatives other than their parents (i.e., grandparents, aunts and uncles). An even smaller percentage of the student population live in foster homes.

The first component of the analysis took place in the development of the coding system after careful review of the transcribed interviews. A total of 50 individual units of information were identified by the researcher. The individual units are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Unit Frequency

Participant	Interview #	Units
John	1	18
Susie	2	18
Leah	3	14
Total		50
Average Units/Interview		16.7

From the individual units, five categories with subcategories in each emerged. Table 2 lists the categories and subcategories. The categories are discussed in more detail below.

Table 2: Categories and Subcategories for Data Analysis

Categories	Subcategories
Category I: Qualities of Former Teachers – Participants remember the qualities of former teachers who had an impact on them as a student	Enthusiasm Taught class in interesting ways Warmth Intelligence Knowledge of Subject Matter Accepting Pliable Building relationships with students Teacher challenged students
Category II: Initial Career and Teaching Component within the Career - Participants’ initial career and making connections with this career and teaching	Health Care Administrator Working with children Training others Hotel Management Training others Customer service Counseling Working with children Teaching appropriate behaviors
Category III: The Decision to Change Careers – Participants’ reasons for changing careers	The attacks on September 11 th Loss of job Mother’s influence Inspired by daughter’s learning
Category IV: Teaching Fulfillment - Participants’ finding validation in the switch to teaching	Making their day Right place to be Contentment Contributing to others’ learning Impacting student achievement
Category V: Qualities as a Teacher – Students describe the participants as teachers	Build students’ level of confidence Making connections Listening to students Warmth Passionate Strong background knowledge Humorous Relevant learning

Category I: Qualities of Former Teachers

Almost everyone can remember a teacher who made an impact on them; either fondly remembers them in a positive way, or perhaps not so fondly with the memory of a negative experience. Teachers, like parents, are very influential to young people. As the opening question to the interview (outside of demographic questions), the researcher believed that it was important to establish the influence that former teachers have on individuals. It was observed that in all three interviews, the participants spoke with emotion about their former teachers, and it did not take them long at all to recall the qualities of their favorite teachers.

John reported, “One guy was super enthusiastic, and you could tell he was loving in everything he did – a really positive kind of guy, tried lots of different things in the classroom, things that I’d never done in math.” John recalled two different teachers, interestingly enough they were both math teachers and they were both men – another coincidence since John currently serves as a math teacher. When describing the second teacher, John emphasized that this teacher built relationships with his students through establishing a safe environment in the classroom, where students were allowed to make mistakes and ask questions.

Susie's genuine response leapt from her mouth immediately – two teachers, both women with whom she still remains in contact. Their greatest influence on Susie was their “warmth, intelligence, knowledge of their subject matter, and accepting of students.” She continued by saying,

I see them on a social basis too which is nice, and I've told them both how much they meant to me, and just thinking about it now, brings tears to my eyes. I'm getting emotional, and they were just wonderful women.

Leah, not an emotional person by nature, quickly responded matter-of-factly about the relationship she had with two former teachers. “They took an interest in me, in my work, and they cared about what was going on other than the classroom because it affected the work in the classroom.” Leah went on to describe that during a very low point in her life, her father's death at her age of thirteen, her seventh grade female English teacher took her under her wing to encourage and support her. Leah continued to discuss how that one relationship with an adult outside of her family influenced her greatly in her passion for reading and writing. However, a second teacher, her college Literature male teacher, also had a great influence on her personal writing style.

He saw me as a writer and took me under his wing, and pushed me to write. He was very challenging at the same time – he was constantly criticizing me, and I wasn't used to that. He took me down a peg or two, but in a caring way and wanted me to get used to being critiqued. He was a lot of fun.

The above comments indicate that all three participants could readily remember influential teachers and could describe in detail what happened in their classrooms many years ago. One of the other interesting similarities the researcher found was that all participants had been in contact with their former teachers they spoke so fondly of in the past years to let them know of the impact they had on their lives.

Category II: Initial Career and Teaching Component within the Career

The researcher was hoping to make a connection between the participant's first career and teaching by asking questions to determine if a teaching component in their first career laid the foundation of interest to pursue teaching in the future.

John readily admits that his first idea of a career was teaching, but his hopes were dashed by his grandfather when he was a young boy in high school. His ninth grade teacher encouraged students to begin thinking about what they planned to do after high school. John fondly remembered his two former math teachers that made an impact on him, and when he happily announced to his grandfather his desire to become a teacher, his grandfather announced, “Well, then, you'll never feed your family.” John remembers being crushed because he sought his grandfather's approval, for he was the paternal figure in his extended family, and “he took the dream away.” Soon after, John needed to make a decision about what he wanted to do. Still unsure, he attended college; changed his field of studies several times, and ended up graduating with a degree in marketing. His first job was in health care which eventually led him to administration in the health care industry. During his tenure as a health care administrator, John dabbled in the area of teaching by working with children (children who were terminally ill while residing in the health care facility) and by training staff. He also participated in leading professional development sessions for others in the health care industry.

Susie, much like John, had no initial career ideas. Her first love was history, and so she naturally thought about becoming an art historian at a museum. Susie did not pursue a job or a career in the museum world, but decided to take a job of convenience which led to a career in hotel management. When Susie was first out of college, with a degree in History, she was undecided what path she would take. The glitz and glamour of working in the big city's newest hotel inspired Susie to obtain work in an entry-level position. Years later, Susie's hard work led her to hotel management where she, much like John, had related teaching components to her job. Customer service and training other employees were two of her primary responsibilities in management.

Leah's first job was in counseling, but not in schools. She reported,
When I first thought about careers, I thought I knew I wanted to be a counselor, but not in the school environment – that was not even in my conscious thought. I wanted to be a therapist or counselor of that sort to help people who had problems.

Leah's first job and career led her to a group home where she was a live-in counselor for two adolescent girls with severe emotional and mental problems. During this time, Leah reports that her responsibilities in teaching appropriate behaviors were most similar to a teaching component in the classroom.

Although classroom teaching is more than working with children and training others to understand a concept, the three participants were already using teaching components in their first careers – although none of the participants responded that it was these components that sparked an interest in their change of career.

Category III: The Decision to Change Careers

Making the decision to change careers can not be equated with other decisions that people are faced with on a daily basis. Choosing which restaurant to dine or which suit to buy are not life-long decisions, but making the choice to switch careers has great impact on a person's life. The three participants all chose to change their careers for three different reasons. While conducting the interviews, the researcher used probing questions to determine if the influences which led to their career-change were similar, but during the analysis phase of the data, it was determined that all three participants had very personal, yet important reasons to switch careers to teaching.

John, the health care administrator, was at work on the morning of September 11, 2001 when terrorists attacked the New York World Trade Center and the Washington, D. C. Pentagon. Although that morning was life-changing for thousands of people, it would also be the event that changed John's pursuit of personal fulfillment and happiness. John reported,

The big trigger for me was September 11th. I truly liked a lot of the work that I did. But, I knew, when I went to college, when I was going with the flow, but I didn't know where the flow was carrying me, it was sort of like life without a rudder, and even though I like it, there's something different that I'm meant to be doing because our world just got flipped upside down, and life is too short – there are no guarantees. There may not be a tomorrow, and I think I just started thinking in those terms. I had filed this teaching thing of mine so deep, that it really took me a little while to remember how passionate I felt about that, and I really started thinking about it seriously.

John's perspective about the tragic events of September 11th brought about a change in his economic, emotional and spiritual life. It is with comments such as these, that the researcher believes that John is a very reflective and soulful person.

Susie, on the other hand, decided to switch careers due to a change in circumstances. Although she enjoyed her new career in hotel management, she was forced out of her job when the hotel was bought by new investors. Susie was out of a job, living with friends, and didn't know what avenue to pursue. She credits her mother for influencing her to pursue teaching, for her mother always thought that Susie had an aspiring career in the field of classroom teaching. Since Susie's college degree was in the field of history, an area of great interest to her, she found it relatively easy to return to college to take the necessary courses to become a full-time teacher.

It was her daughter's love for learning that inspired Leah to switch careers to teaching. She was already working with children through her counseling, but it was limited since she was only working with two or three adolescents at a time.

I started thinking that teaching may be interesting, and I started thinking about this because my daughter is in school, and seeing her in school and looking at how she learns, made me think that this was something that would fit because I felt a calling to it – it wasn't a calling like all my life I had the calling, it was more like this would work for me, and I would be good at it.

Influenced by people or events, all three participants made the change to teaching after some reflection and some soul searching. Additionally, all knew that the path to making a career change would take commitment, compromise and time.

Category IV: Teaching Fulfillment

It's a healthy exercise to complete – measure the personal fulfillment of your job, especially if you have sacrificed time and money to switch careers to another profession as an established adult. Fortunately for all three participants, the exercise in measuring their personal fulfillment in switching careers to teaching has been validated.

John, already penned as the soulful participant, adds another reflective and passionate response about being fulfilled as a teacher.

Sometimes it's just a good feeling you get when you see a student's eyes light up. You've seen the fish video, right? One of the things is make their day – making their day and seeing them learn. It happens every day in every class. Maybe it's just in a small way, but it's the most amazing feeling. It's such a gift for me to be able to teach, I mean, I get so much back, it's really, really incredible.

The researcher gets the feeling through some of Susie's responses that her road to teaching wasn't as sure-footed as the other participants, but in her response to this question, Susie is self-assured that teaching is the right place to be.

I love my job. I love what I do. I never take it for granted that I have a job. That I am lucky enough to have a job that I enjoy waking up to and going to, and even though there are days that are horrible, I never think that I shouldn't do this.

Susie's honest answer leaves the researcher to believe that her switch has been truly validated.

Leah's response is quick and to the point. "Contentment, obviously, and the feeling that I'm contributing – there's no doubt – this is where I need to be."

To have validation through self reflection is powerful, and for the three participants who took a chance on changing careers, their change has been validated.

Category V: Qualities as a Teacher

To wrap up the interview, the researcher found another powerful connection in reasking the first question but in the form of how current students would now describe them (the participants) as a teacher – what qualities would the students describe as making an impact on them? When the participants were reflecting about their answer to this question, the researcher noticed the humility that overtook their stature. They each smiled, and then humbly answered in a soft voice, as if they didn't want any attention drawn to them for being an influential teacher.

John thought for a few moments before he replied,

I tell them, that one of the most courageous things they can do in a classroom is raise their hands, especially if they're not sure of themselves. It's really awesome to see kids grow into one of your star pupils – so, I think feeling safe in the classroom, making connections, and the other thing I say too is really listening to them – what is it that they are really saying?

It has been observed by the researcher that John's current and former students have recognized him as a teacher who has made an impact on them by writing notes of thanks, inviting him to extra-curricular activities, and for frequently stopping by for a brief visit.

While exuding much humility, Susie responded,

I think they would describe my warmth; that I make it interesting because of my background knowledge, and I can make it fun for a seventh grader. The passion I have for the subject, and the trust – the interest that I take in them.

Susie has also been rewarded in conventional ways by her students by nominating her for a distinguished teaching award and for frequent visits.

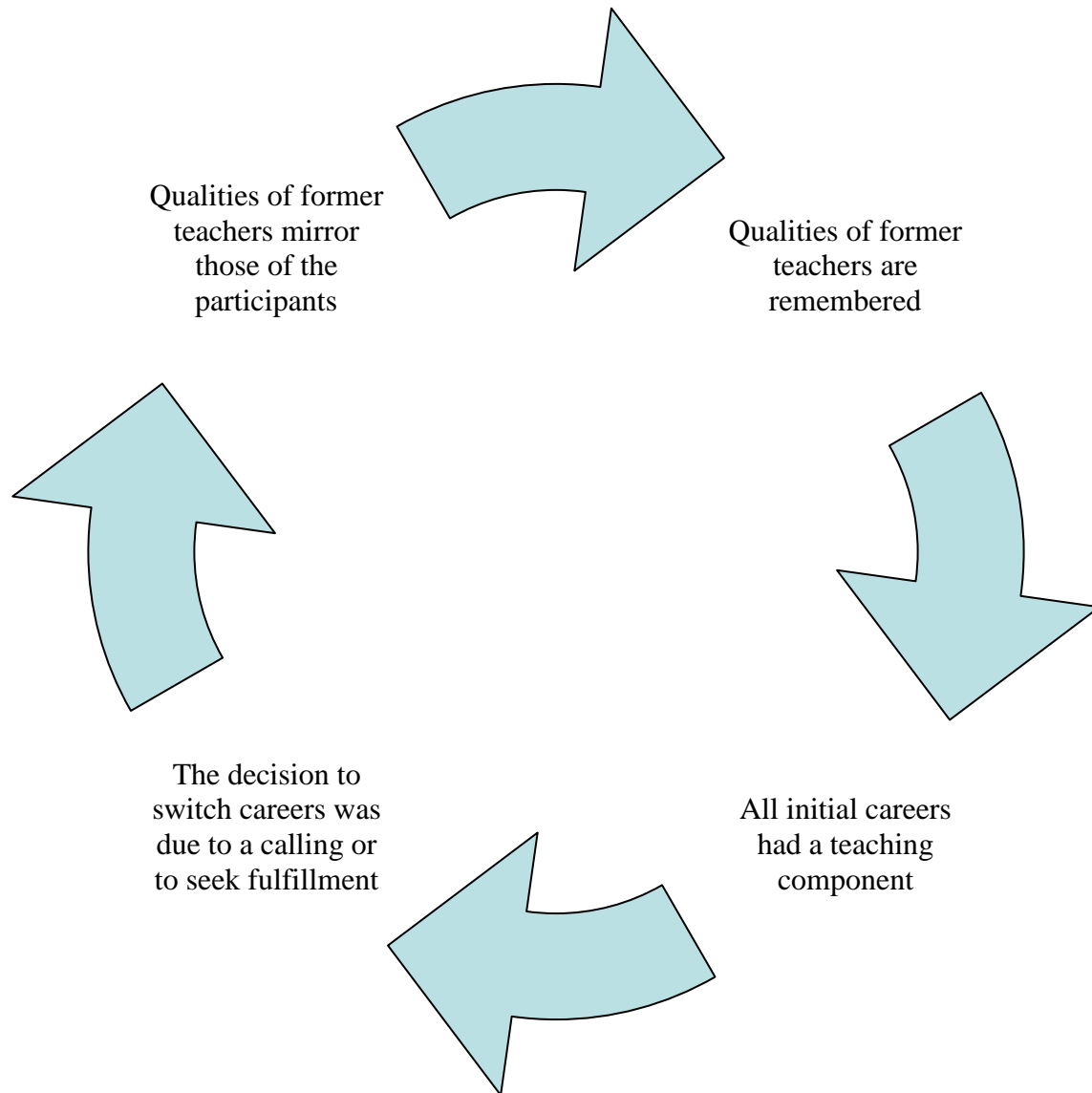
Leah, who has also been awarded both by her school and her students for different awards, responded,

I think it's about the relevance in the classroom. It's more than rote learning and book learning, and making it fun and interactive and not just sitting in the desks. Humor – we laugh a lot in the classroom, and that's why I love middle school. They have fun, and they learn.

Each of the participants connected with at least one teacher while they were a student, and from their responses and their personal accomplishments, it is believed that these teachers will also leave an impact on students – perhaps one will speak about them years from now while conducting their own research and analysis.

Discussion

Through the preliminary data collection and analysis, patterns emerged in terms of four themes. The primary themes are presented in the visual (Figure 1) of a cyclical model, one factor affecting and supporting the next.

Figure 1

The first theme is that qualities of former teachers are remembered. Not only are they remembered, but they are remembered fondly by all of the participants, and two of the three participants remembered them with an emotional response. The qualities that the participants remembered are those qualities that left a lasting impact, descriptors that they could recall quickly. Each of the participants had the opportunity in recent years to share the impact they had with their teachers. Those memories are deep-rooted and may have had an influence in the shaping of their lives.

The second theme is that all of the participants' initial careers had a teaching component. Each of them was in a field that required either working with children, with customers, or having a training component. Determining if the teaching component of working with children or training others affected their decisions to change careers to teaching is inconclusive, but the researcher thinks it is interesting to note that some element of teaching was part of their initial career.

The third emerging theme from two of the participants is that the decision to switch careers was due to a calling or to seek fulfillment. Both John and Leah felt that switching careers to teaching was due to a calling or a deep-rooted idea of fulfillment. Susie's path to teaching was due to an unfortunate loss of a job, but with her mother's influence, she found fulfillment in teaching.

The fourth emerging theme from all three participants is that qualities of former teachers mirror those of the participants. Perhaps unknowingly, but the participants' descriptions of their former teachers, would also be the very same descriptions that they predicted how their students would describe them. The researcher believes that this cyclical pattern supports the idea that former teachers make an impact or greatly influence current teachers. Perhaps not in the area of making career choices, this can not be determined by this study, but perhaps in the area of how people would like to be remembered.

Limitations

In qualitative research, some factors need to be considered to determine the rigor of the study. In this mini-study, internal validity (also known as credibility), allows the researcher to confirm the interpretations of the data. This occurred by requesting the participants to review their coded interviews. To determine dependability (also known as reliability), the researcher determined that the data measured the original intent of the research. Another factor to determine rigor is that of confirmability where the findings are traced to the original sources. Due to the limited number of participants in this study, confirmability (also known as objectivity) was established.

The limitations of this study begin with the original research problem and foreshadowed problems. More thought was necessary to determine the original intent of the study, along with determining more in-depth questions that would lead to a greater understanding of career switchers. Instead of focusing on the reasons why a person chose to switch careers to teaching, a more complete study of the challenges and highlights a person experiences as a second career teacher may have proven to be more interesting, more enlightening for future studies, and more substantive for interested parties.

Another limitation may be found in the study findings due to the low number of participants. The emerging themes focus on the data collection of only three individuals. The small number of participants may limit the generalizations of the study's findings.

Recommendations for Research

This mini-study offers tentative findings based on three participant's perspectives concerning their desire to switch careers to teaching. The researcher believes that to further understand the role of a career switcher, it would be helpful to include interview questions concerning (1) the actual process or implementation in switching careers, (2) the challenges one faces when beginning the new teaching position as an older (not right-out-of-college) person, and (3) the positive impacts a career switcher has in terms of other experiences outside of a school setting. Additionally, the researcher believes that valuable questions about advice from career switchers to future career switchers would be a beneficial component.

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Author Biography

Diana Yesbeck has served as an educator for 27 years. During her tenure as a teacher, she taught in private and public K-12 schools in the areas of mathematics and science. Her mathematics teaching ranged from Math 6 content through Algebra II content, while her science teaching was in the area of physical science. Throughout Dr. Yesbeck's years of teaching, she fostered a learning environment of active student engagement and focused on relating content to real life applications. Considered an expert in the field of mathematics instruction, Dr. Yesbeck presented at multiple conferences and workshops on authentic assessments, instructional best practices, and grading practices. After serving in the classroom for 15 years, Dr. Yesbeck became a school administrator for five years, working with a collaborative team of professionals in a middle school setting.

Dr. Yesbeck's educational journey began at Virginia Commonwealth University, earning a Bachelor of Science Degree in Mathematics. She continued her education at University of Virginia, earning a Master of Education Degree in Administration and Supervision. Seven years later, she earned her Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Educational Leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University. Within one year of earning her terminal degree, Dr. Yesbeck began her current position at Randolph-Macon College as an assistant professor of education. Currently, serving as the department chair, she teaches elementary methods courses in mathematics and science in the teacher preparation program, as well as supervises student teachers.

Diana Yesbeck lives in the Richmond, Virginia area. She is a music and sports enthusiast; an avid reader of a variety of materials; and outdoor adventurer, and one who enjoys travel and family activities.