

# Life Satisfaction of Former-Military, Second-Career Changers

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## *Abstract*

*One-hundred thirty-six former-military members with average age of 51 transitioning to a second-career in teaching were surveyed regarding life satisfaction and were found to be satisfied with their lives. The research compliments earlier studies of second-career teachers as effective teachers, yet provides additional insight on former-military teachers, and their life satisfaction with their new career. Guidelines for counselors, mentors, or administrators working with former-military, second-career teachers are included, as well as implications for future research.*

Keywords: *life satisfaction, second-career teachers, military*

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## Introduction

### *Second-Career Teachers*

The value of second-career teachers has been the focus of previous research. Second-career teachers tend to have a values-driven, altruistic, and personal motivation for pursuing teaching (Chambers, 2002; Saylor, 2003), and have effective interpersonal skills and indicated that their previous career experiences will benefit students in the classroom (Saylor, 2003). They bring maturity, good work habits, and life experiences to enhance students' real-world understanding of curriculum content (Resta, Huling, & Rainwater, 2001). In addition to having lower attrition rates, second-career teachers tend to be assertive and speak up about discrepancies or inequities that they may observe in the school system (Resta, Huling, & Rainwater, 2001). Second-career teachers tend to balance some inequities among the population of new teachers, including representation of more male teachers, more teachers of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, and older teachers (McNay, 2001). Nickolich, Feldhaus, Cotton, Barrett, and Smallwood (2010) summarized the value of second-career teachers, by stating,

Mid- and second-career teacher candidates offer a prospective talent pool for the nation's schools. The potential of career changers has yet to be fully tapped, despite substantial growth in the number of programs targeting such candidates in recent years. In addition to their presumed subject matter backgrounds in high demand disciplines, midcareer professionals who are currently a part of or choose to enter teaching can bring new maturity and experience to the nation's talent base of educators and help connect teaching and learning to expanded applications in the world of work. (2010, p. 44)

Some second-career teachers are former-military members. These individuals may have entered the profession through alternative pathways, including Troops to Teachers (TTT). Like other second-career teachers, the effectiveness of TTT teachers has been substantively researched and reported (Bank, 2007; Feistritzer, 2005)

### *Former-Military, Second-Career Teachers*

The Department of Defense partnered with the Department of Education to create TTT in 1994 (Troops to Teachers, 2013).

The TTT mission is to:

1. Assist transitioning Service members to become employed as teachers.
2. Assist our Nation's youth by providing good role models.
3. Assist schools by providing teachers in critical subjects (math, science, special education, foreign language, and career-technical) for needy schools. (Troops to Teachers, 2013. ¶ 2).

Over 9,000 teachers entered the profession through the TTT program, which offers placement assistance (Bank, 2007). Feistritzer (2005) surveyed TTT teachers ( $N = 1,431$ ), alternative route teachers ( $N = 2,647$ ), and traditionally trained teachers ( $N = 1,028$ ), and found TTT teachers were more confident in their abilities to teach as compared to alternative route and traditionally trained teachers. In the same study, TTT teachers were more satisfied with their job and working relationships, including relationships with other teachers, parents, students, and administration. TTT teachers are often more diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, and willingness to teach in high need areas. For example, 82% of TTT teachers are male, as compared to only 18% of all

teachers nationwide, and 23% of TTT teachers are Black, as compared to 6% of teachers nationwide (Feistritzer, 2005). In addition to diversity and job satisfaction, TTT teachers are effective in the classroom. According to Bank (2007),

School principals say Troops teachers are good teachers. In fact, 90 percent of principals surveyed told researchers at Old Dominion University in Virginia in 2005 that they considered former service members more effective in classroom instruction and management than other teachers with similar years of teaching experience. (2007, p. 5)

In addition, over half of TTT teachers rate themselves as “very satisfied” with their jobs, as compared to less than one-third of traditionally trained teachers (Feistritzer, 2005). Second-career teachers have been found to be effective teachers, while also bringing depth, experience, and diversity to the classroom (Feistritzer, 2005; McNay, 2001; Resta, Huling, & Rainwater, 2001). However these studies of former-military, second-career teachers did not examine life satisfaction in their new role as a teacher.

### *Life Satisfaction*

The theories of Levinson (1978) and Schlossberg (1985) indicate that adults may seek midlife career change in an effort to achieve value and meaning in their life. A study of those transitioning to teaching found that “working with young people” and being a “value to society” were the most commonly cited reasons for pursuing teaching (Ludwig, Bacevich, Wayne, Hale, & Uekawa, 2007, p. 87).

In an earlier research study, Crow, Levine, and Nager (1990) conducted qualitative interviews with 13 second-career teachers and developed three profiles of career change: the homecomers, the converted, and the unconverted. Specifically, the homecomers saw their career in education as the place where they had always belonged. While personal circumstances and individual or societal opinions had kept them from originally pursuing teaching as a career, they were individuals who said they were meant to be educators. Individuals who were classified as converters were not originally drawn to education but were changed by a personal life circumstance or situation. Finally, those classified as unconverted were disheartened with their decision to transition to teaching and felt as if they would not pursue the career decision long term (Crow, Levine, & Nager, 1990). These profiles may be considered indicators of the individual’s job satisfaction or life satisfaction.

In more recent studies, Nickolich, Feldhaus, Cotton, Barrett, and Smallwood (2010) examined the life satisfaction of first-year Career and Technical Education (CTE) teachers, as well as the life satisfaction of CTE mentors (e.g., experienced teachers assigned to mentor first-year teachers). The results of their research conducted on 45 CTE mentors and 60 first-year CTE teachers found that mentors expressed greater life satisfaction than first-year teachers. In a related study, Cenkseven-Önder and Sari (2009) utilized the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and other instruments to examine how teachers’ perceptions of quality of school life and burnout levels impacted their life satisfaction. Step-wise regression analysis indicated that teachers’ life satisfaction was predicted by their status in the school, their ability to cope with work related stress, and their perceptions of school administration. While each of these studies discuss the importance of life satisfaction for teachers, neither examine the life-satisfaction of former-military, second-career teachers.

The author contacted TTT in 2008 via email in order to obtain approval for a larger research study examining both life satisfaction and career transition variables. In the email communication, Peter E. Peters, Assistant Chief of TTT, emphasized that TTT has a depth of research on TTT teacher effectiveness. He indicated, however, that much of the previous research had been conducted in reference to the teaching career of TTT members, such as teaching effectiveness and job satisfaction, with little or no focus on the overall life satisfaction of TTT teachers (P. Peters, personal communication, October 23, 2008). Thus, the author examined an underlying research question during the larger study, specifically: *To what extent are former-military, second-career teachers satisfied with their lives in their new careers?*

## Method

The larger research study conducted by the author was based on Schlossberg's classic transition model of Human Adaptation to Transition as a conceptual framework (Schlossberg, 1981). Her model emphasized transition as a process, as well as individuals moving toward, moving through, and moving out of a transition. Members of the TTT database were surveyed via email which provided a link to a secure internet survey instrument. This manuscript focuses on a subset of the responses pertaining strictly to the research question.

### *Instruments*

The SWLS was developed to be a multi-item measure of "life satisfaction as a cognitive-judgmental process" (Diener et al., 1985, p. 71) and consists of a five-item global assessment of life satisfaction, including: "(1) In most ways my life is close to my ideal, (2) The conditions of my life are excellent, (3) I am satisfied with my life, (4) So far I have gotten the important things I want in life, and (5) If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing" (Diener, 2009, ¶ 3). The SWLS focuses on subjective well-being (SWB). According to Pavot and Diener (1993), the SWLS allows respondents to evaluate their overall satisfaction based on the measures that they deem to be of value, as opposed to the measures that the researcher deems of value.

The SWLS responses are given on a seven-point Likert scale with "1" indicating *strongly disagree* and "7" indicating *strongly agree*. SWLS results are reported as an overall score as shown in Table 1. Reported reliability for the SWLS includes Cronbach's alpha of .87 for the scale and .82 for test-retest (two-month interval). Earlier research provided evidence of validity and indicated moderately strong convergence with several other instruments (Diener et al., 1985). The SWLS has been used with a number of cross-cultural studies, including the United States Marine Corps (Pavot & Diener, 2008). In this study, an average score was used ranging from zero to seven.

Qualitative questions were also employed in this study. Although two open-ended questions were included in the larger study, only one specifically addressed perceptions of the career transition and life satisfaction. As such, themes resulting from the open-ended question, "*Given your stage of transition (i.e., moving-in to the transition, moving-through the transition, moving-on from the transition), what additional thoughts come to mind about the relationship you see between your mid-life career transition and your life satisfaction?*" are also discussed in this manuscript.

### *Participants*

Sampling was based on voluntary participation, as opposed to specific sampling techniques. Data samples were drawn from the TTT database, which contains both current-military personnel and former-military personnel (veterans) who are pursuing a teaching career. Within this database, there are two specific populations, TTT mentors and TTT members. TTT mentors have already completed the transition to teaching and volunteer to provide guidance to TTT members going through transition. At the time of this study, contact information for 178 TTT mentors was available publically on the TTT website, however 24 emails were invalid. Of the 154 TTT mentors emailed, 90 responded for a response rate of 58%. TTT members were more difficult to access since contact information for TTT members is not available publically, but instead it is held at 33 state and regional offices. Emails were sent to 49 contact persons listed on the TTT website that represent the states/regional offices asking that they distribute the survey via email, newsletter, or website. Responses were received from 46 members. Due to the sporadic method of acquiring member responses, it is not possible to assess an accurate response rate for the TTT members, and responses clearly represent a very small percentage of the overall TTT database.

Data from 136 participants (90 mentors, 46 members) were used for analysis after removing incomplete responses. Characteristics of the mentor and member groups were examined separately using cross-tabs and graphs, and no significant differences were noted among the two samples. Demographically, 86% of participants were male, 10% female, and approximately 3.6% transgender or the item was left blank. Of the participants, 86% were married, 4.4% divorced, 3.7% single, and 6% marked “other” or left the item blank. Eight-seven percent (87%) identified themselves as non-Hispanic and 79% as white. The mean age was 51 (range 21 to 69 years), and the mean combined household annual income was \$102,224 (range \$0 to \$250,000). An overwhelming 80% of participants were in the post-transition stage, meaning they had already started their new career. Participants were spread among branches of service: Air Force (32%), Navy (28%), Army (21%), and Marine Corps (13%), and not indicated (6%). Officers and enlisted personnel were nearly equal with 47% officers, 44% enlisted, and 9% not indicated. Participants served an average of 20.5 years in the military and reported an average of 29.4 months between leaving the military and beginning their new careers.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, coding of qualitative responses, measures of central tendency, and *t*-tests. Descriptive statistics were utilized to describe the participants. Responses to the open-ended question were imported into an Excel file. Coding of open-ended responses was used to organize and interpret the participant responses; all coding was completed by hand. Responses were analyzed and coded based on recurring themes and concepts among the responses. Once codes were compiled and condensed, an external individual re-evaluated the findings for clarity and accuracy, as well as to eliminate researcher bias. Participants’ mean scores on the SWLS were examined. In addition, *t*-tests were conducted to compare the mentor and member groups.

Limitations of the study and the analysis included the fact that respondents for this research were not randomly selected, but rather participants were instead volunteers. In addition, participants

were self-reporting, as opposed to external observation or objective reporting. Additionally, the sample size was small and there was a lack of diversity among respondents.

## Results

Former-military, second-career teachers in this study reported being satisfied with their life. On average, participants scored approximately 5.6 on the SWLS, which indicates that they are highly satisfied with life, although not very highly satisfied. The SWLS uses six levels of satisfaction (using both average scores or summed aggregate scores) which include: very highly satisfied, highly satisfied, average, slightly below average, dissatisfied, and extremely dissatisfied, as indicated in Table 1 (Diener, 2006).

Table 2 outlines the participants' mean scores in the areas of life satisfaction. *T*-tests were conducted to compare the life satisfaction means of the mentor and member groups, and did not demonstrate statistically significant differences in relation to life satisfaction. These *t*-tests were conducted (1) to determine if the results should be reported separately for mentors and members, and (2) to address an underlying concern that mentors might report excessively positive perceptions of the transition experience. Although there is no monetary compensation, mentors apply and are selected to be TTT mentors. Thus, there is concern that only those who had positive experiences would be selected for the role. Specifically, the results of the *t*-tests indicated no statistically significant differences in life satisfaction, and eliminated that concern. *T*-test results were as follows: life satisfaction,  $t(134) = -.221, p = .826, r = -.20$  (mentors:  $M = 5.57, SD = 1.22$ ; members:  $M = 5.62, SD = 1.19$ ).

Table 1  
*Interpreting the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)*

Life Satisfaction (five items)	Aggregate Scores	Average Scores	Mean
Very High	30-35	6-7	6.5
High	25-29	5-6	5.4
Average	20-24	4-5	4.4
Below Average	15-19	3-4	3.4
Dissatisfied	10-14	2-3	2.4
Extremely Dissatisfied	5-9	1-2	1.4

*Note.* Adapted from "Understanding Scores on the Satisfaction with Life Scale" by E. Diener. Copyright 2006 by E. Diener.

Table 2  
*Life Satisfaction for Members, Mentors, and Combined*

Life Satisfaction	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Outcome Assessment
TTT Mentors ( $n = 90$ )	5.57	1.22	<i>highly satisfied</i>
TTT Members ( $n = 46$ )	5.62	1.19	<i>highly satisfied</i>
Combined ( $N = 136$ )	5.59	1.21	<i>highly satisfied</i>

*Note.* Life Satisfaction as reported by participants using SWLS (Diener et al., 1985) including five items on a 7-point Likert scale.

The participants' responses to the open-ended question (e.g., *Given your stage of transition, what additional thoughts come to mind about the relationship you see between your mid-life career transition and your life satisfaction?*) partially supported the statistical data indicating that former-military members are satisfied with their life as second-career teachers. Specifically, participants saw their new careers as an opportunity to help and serve others which they felt added to their overall life satisfaction. Participants also viewed accomplishments in their lives, such as awards or mentoring roles, as contributing to their life satisfaction. Others discussed the personal challenge they have of trying to be content with life, while struggling in other areas, such as finances or the job search. Others disagreed that there was any relationship between their transition and their life satisfaction.

## Discussion

### *Implications for Former-Military, Second-Career Teachers*

Based on this study, former-military, second-career teachers surveyed appear to be highly satisfied with their life in their new career choice. The mean life satisfaction score for all members surveyed was 5.6 on a 7-point scale. Thus, former-military, second-career teachers appear to be highly satisfied with their life, but not very highly satisfied. Diener (2006) described those who are "very highly satisfied" in that those individual's believe that their lives are the best that they will ever be. Of those who are "highly satisfied," Diener (2006) stated,

Individuals who score in this range like their lives and feel that things are going well. Of course their lives are not perfect, but they feel that things are mostly good. Furthermore, just because the person is satisfied does not mean she or he is complacent. In fact, growth and challenge might be part of the reason the respondent is satisfied. For most people in this high-scoring range, life is enjoyable, and the major domains of life are going well – work or school, family, friends, leisure, and personal development. The person may draw motivation from the areas of dissatisfaction. (Diener, 2006, ¶ 2)

Diener's description of the 'highly satisfied' individuals mirrors many of the comments and themes noted in the qualitative responses pertaining to their career transition and life satisfaction, such as helping and serving others and contentment vs. struggle. In the words of one respondent,

The road is often long and hard. We still have to put food on the table. But, we as veterans are used to this. The long hours of school and civilian life are small in stature compared to our days served in the military.

Another stated,

I'm very happy with the choices and the opportunities teaching has provided. The pay is not what I needed, so I feel a little limited in that area. I do find a need to work part-time to stay financially stable. But teaching is very rewarding in many other ways. I enjoy it more than the military, but I do miss the excitement of the fast-paced military life.

The responses of former-military, second-career teachers in this study indicate that they are satisfied with their lives post-transition. These findings add to Feistritzer's (2005) earlier research signifying that former-military, second-career teachers were satisfied with their jobs, as well as Bank's (2007) summary stating that former-military, second-career teachers have lower attrition rates than traditionally trained teachers. Since most traditionally trained teachers will

leave their teaching positions within the first five years (Bank, 2007), attrition may be viewed as one indicator of dissatisfaction with one's career.

### *Implications for Counselors, Mentors, and Administrators*

Counselors, mentors, and administrators working with former-military, second-career teachers should note that the majority of respondents reported high life satisfaction post-transition. However these responses should be used cautiously. Responses of satisfaction may be due to respondents being former military members (perhaps non-military life was more satisfying than military life), that respondents were transitioning to teaching (perhaps teaching is more satisfying to one's life than non-teaching careers), or other reasons not examined. It may also be due to most respondents being in the post-transition stage, and having already experienced a satisfying transition. The concept of "already experiencing success" was also discussed in the Nickolich et al. (2010) research, in which the authors stated,

It is reasonable to conclude that the successes that experienced CTE faculty have experienced over the years would contribute to their perceived life satisfaction. We also conclude that experience in teaching leads to more confidence. (2010, p. 48)

Yet it is possible that individuals are seeking an opportunity to find balance and renewal in midlife, as indicated by earlier researchers (Levinson, 1978; Murphy & Burck, 1976). Thus, former-military, second-career teachers who are struggling with the transition, or intimidated by its prospect, may take solace in knowing that others who have made the transition appear to be satisfied with their lives overall.

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions are offered for counselors, mentors, and administrators working with former-military, second career teachers:

- 1) Encourage former-military, second-career teachers to persevere in their teaching career. The majority of respondents in this study (80%) had already begun their career in teaching and indicated high life satisfaction. Other studies found that first-year teachers were less satisfied with their lives than experienced teachers (Nickolich et al., 2010). Thus, it is important for former-military, second-career teachers to realize that while their new career in teaching may be challenging, those who have persevered were found to be satisfied with their lives.
- 2) Encourage former-military, second-career teachers to pursue mentoring opportunities, or to seek mentoring. In this study, 66% of those surveyed were mentors. While no significant differences were found in life satisfaction among mentors and mentees in this study, other studies (Nickolich et al., 2010) did find mentors to be statistically more satisfied with their lives than first-year teachers, stating, "We also believe that helping others (mentoring) makes one feel good, more so than mentees who rely on the help." (Nickolich et al., 2010, p. 48)
- 3) It is important for military members to understand that life satisfaction stems from areas beyond one's career advancements, promotions/ranks, and honors/medals. Military members may be accustomed to defining themselves by the items listed on their DD Form 214, which is essentially a transcript outlining their military career. Military members may be unfamiliar with civilian career development processes (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). Clemens and Milsom (2008) stated that the more military members talk about their military service, the more likely they are to express their interests and values. These values, which drew them to a career in the military, may be the same values that led them to pursue a career in teaching.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Limitations to the research are a small sample size and lack of diversity among respondents. Generalizations can be made for military members transitioning to teaching, and specifically those who are white, non-Hispanic, male, and married. Generalizations should not be made to other populations including other demographic groups, such as women, people of color, and those who are single, nor should they be made to other occupational groups, such as those transitioning from non-military careers and those transitioning to non-teaching careers.

There are ample opportunities for future research. Efforts should be made to replicate the research with larger and more diverse populations. This would include various demographic backgrounds including women and people of color. Conducting a random sample survey would be ideal, as participants in this current study were volunteers. In addition, it would be interesting to duplicate the research with non-military, midlife career changers, perhaps via other alternative teacher certification programs, in order to determine if the results are specific to former-military, second-career teachers. As stated, military members have been conditioned to evaluate their worth and growth based on their on-the-job successes, such as promotion, rank, awards, and medals. Examining non-military, midlife career changers may provide alternative outcomes pertaining to their life satisfaction.

### **Summary**

Former-military members transitioning to teaching were found to be highly satisfied with their lives as second-career teachers, although they were not very highly satisfied with their lives. Counselors, mentors, and administrators can assist former-military, second-career teachers by (1) encouraging them to persevere in their teaching career, (2) encouraging mentoring opportunities, and (3) reinforcing that life satisfaction in their teaching career may look different than their military career, yet may be driven by their same personal values.

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